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Allegiances

RiverClan:

Leader: Birchstar- white tom with gray spots

Deputy: Tawnyclaw- handsome dark gray tom with dark blue eyes

Medicine Cat: Nightwhisper- fluffy black tom

Apprentice: Silverheart- striped pale gray tabby she-cat

Warriors:

Twigtail- brown tom with brown eyes

Bristlepelt- orange and white tom

Sweetstripe- sand-colored she-cat

Apprentice: Ripplepaw

Cloudsplash- black and white tom

Apprentice: Sootpaw

Cherryheart- tortoiseshell she-cat

Mudpelt- thickset brown tom

Apprentice: Beechpaw

Sorrelstream- pale ginger she-cat

Apprentice: Reedpaw

Redblaze- red tom with green eyes

Apprentice: Amberpaw

Cinderfrost- gray she-cat

Apprentice: Specklepaw (formerly Pebblenose's apprentice)

Poppywhisker- pale brown tabby she-cat

Apprentices:

Ripplepaw- silver tabby tom with white flecks

Sootpaw- gray tom with black patches

Specklepaw- tortoiseshell she-cat

Beechpaw- gray tom with amber eyes

Reedpaw- black and white she-cat

Amberpaw- tortoiseshell she-cat with an orange patch on her chest

Queens:

Ashflower- pale gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Nettlestep- sleek brown she-cat (mother to Twigtail's kit: Falconkit, a dark brown tabby tom)

Pebblenose- fluffy white she-cat (expecting Mudpelt's kits)

Elders:

Troutleap- dappled gray tom with long legs

ThunderClan:

Leader: Duskstar- fluffy gray tom

Deputy: Copperfoot- burly ginger tom with brown paws

Medicine Cat: Dawnpelt- pale gray tom with blue eyes

Apprentice: Goldshine- gold-colored she-cat

Warriors:

Dapplenose- tortoiseshell she-cat with a white speckled muzzle

Amberclaw- reddish-brown tom with green eyes

Apprentice: Leafpaw

Oakfoot- muscular ginger tom

Apprentice: Stonepaw

Stormspots- gray tom with unusually spotted fur

Swiftsky- brown and white tom with amber eyes

Apprentice: Cloudpaw

Graytail- gray tom with yellow eyes

Pinefeather- muscular brown tom

Apprentice: Breezepaw

Rainfleck- silver and gray striped tom with white paws

Apprentice: Sparrowpaw

Blacknose- black tom with green eyes

Larkshine- ginger she-cat with a white underbelly

Foxclaw- fluffy ginger tom

Darkpelt- dark gray tom with dark gray eyes

Apprentices:

Leafpaw- tortoiseshell and white she-cat

Stonepaw- gray tabby tom

Cloudpaw- small white tom

Breezepaw- brown she-cat

Sparrowpaw- brown tom with black paws

Queens:

Skystream- white she-cat with icy blue eyes (mother to Pinefeather's kits: Ivykit, a brown and white she-kit; and Thrushkit, a mottled gray and brown tom)

Mintfur- pale gray she-cat (expecting Copperfoot's kits)

Elders:

Mosswhisker- gray tom with one white forepaw

Frostmuzzle- gray she-cat with a white muzzle

WindClan:

Leader: Featherstar- sand-colored she-cat with green eyes

Deputy: Wasptail- muscular brown tom

Medicine Cat: Morningwish- tortoiseshell she-cat with a white chest and paws

Apprentice: Beechnose- pale brown tabby she-cat

Warriors:

Fernstripe- gray tabby she-cat

Russetclaw- dark ginger tom with large paws

Apprentice: Harepaw

Crowshade- fluffy black tom

Apprentice: Patchpaw

Fawnstep- russet-colored she-cat with a white spotted underbelly

Honeytail- pretty mottled brown she-cat

Sunstripe- ginger tom with dark stripes

Apprentice: Finchpaw

Thrushfur- gray tom with a striped tail and green eyes

Apprentice: Heatherpaw

Goldenwing- ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Rowanheart- small brown tom

Apprentice: Whitepaw

Yellowbird- long-furred sandy she-cat

Apprentice: Dewpaw

Thornpelt- mottled gray tom

Sparrowclaw- sleek brown tom

Apprentice: Brackenpaw

Apprentices:

Harepaw- brown she-cat

Patchpaw- gray and white she-cat

Finchpaw- black tom

Heatherpaw- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Whitepaw- white she-cat with green eyes

Dewpaw- silver tabby she-cat

Brackenpaw- mottled brown tom

Queens:

Briarwhisker- ginger she-cat (mother to Sunstripe's kits; Silverkit, a silver tom; and Berrykit, a tortoiseshell she-kit)

Sandcloud- pale ginger she-cat (expecting Sparrowclaw's kits)

Elders:

Gorsewhisker- ginger tom with short legs

ShadowClan:

Leader: Berrystar- tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

Deputy: Redclaw- dark ginger she-cat with a torn ear

Medicine Cat: Whitewhisker- gray-striped white tom

Apprentice: Junipertail- orange and white she-cat with green eyes

Warriors:

Nightfang- black tom with unusually long teeth

Lilyheart- mottled brown she-cat

Nightwind- fluffy gray tabby she-cat

Stormheart- black and white tom with dark blue eyes

Squirrelwhisker- ginger she-cat with long whiskers

Apprentice: Darkpaw

Longear- pale ginger tom with large ears

Brightleaf- tortoiseshell she-cat

Apprentice: Brindlepaw

Adderfoot- gray tom

Apprentice: Mistpaw

Talontail- gray-striped white tom with blue eyes

Snakefang- gray tom with dark spots

Icetail- pale blue gray she-cat (almost white) with a striped tail

Tallheart- long-legged black tom with a white chest and belly

Whitefur- fluffy white tom with gray paws and tail-tip

Apprentices:

Darkpaw- black tom with amber eyes

Brindlepaw- brown tabby she-cat

Mistpaw- white and gray she-cat with green eyes

Queens:

Foxtail- brown tabby she-cat with a fluffy tail (mother to Tanglestar's kits: Rosekit, a dark ginger she-kit; and Firekit, a bright ginger tom)

Mosspelt- tortoiseshell and white she-cat (mother to Stormheart's kit: Rainkit, a gray tabby tom)

Tawnytail- black and gray she-cat (mother to Longear's kits: Toadkit, a black tom with green eyes; and Pinekit, a pale ginger tom)

Elders:

Snowclaw- black tom with white paws

Thorntooth- large black tom with green eyes, partially blind

Cats Outside Clans:

Jay- dark gray tom

Smokey- gray tabby she-cat, Jay's mate

Minnow- speckled silver she-cat, formerly of RiverClan

Apollo- handsome black tom

Oliver- fluffy ginger kittypet tom

Chapter 1

Snow fell thickly from the clouded sky, burying the ground under a heavy layer of white. Minnow trudged through the accumulation, a scrawny squirrel clamped firmly in her jaws, and squinted her eyes against the downfall. She hadn't meant to be gone so long, but prey had been hard to come by; she'd had to venture out farther than normal, into the outskirts of the forest, and all she'd managed to catch was this meager squirrel. Now she was slowly making her way back to the barn as the snow fell faster. Her muscles ached and she couldn't feel her paws, and her stomach was yowling with hunger.

Minnow finally made it to the barn on the Twoleg farm, and the sun was beginning to dip behind the Twoleg nest as night approached. The tall layer of snowfall tapered off at the entrance to the barn, and Minnow jumped out onto the dry straw under the cover of the barn roof. She shook the snow from her fur and her whiskers, trying to shake some warmth back into her pelt. Blinking in the dim light, she made her way to the back of the barn, circling around the huge sleeping monster that lived there, and towards the three nests of straw in the far corner.

"Hey, you're back!" Minnow was greeted warmly by Smokey, one of the barn cats who had taken her in back at the beginning of leaf-fall. She and her mate Jay lived in the Twoleg barn, which was always warm and had plenty of straw for nests.

Minnow dropped the squirrel, spitting out the hairs it left in her mouth. She had learned to hunt different kinds of prey in the recent moons, but she couldn't wait until the pond on the Twoleg farm was no longer frozen over; she craved fish. "Hi," she meowed back to Smokey, not meeting her eyes.

"I was worried something had happened," Smokey came over to Minnow, eyes alight with concern. "You're not normally gone so long, and this weather is terrible."

Minnow ducked away from the gray she-cat's gaze. Smokey was always acting protective of Minnow. "I had trouble finding prey," she mumbled, wishing Smokey wouldn't take such an interest in her. *It won't do me any good to get attached to any cat,* she thought.

"Well, there's no shortage of prey in here," Jay's smooth, deep voice sounded from behind Minnow. She turned to see the large gray tom entering the barn, shaking snow from his whiskers. "I don't know why you insist on hunting out there, especially in this weather." He padded past Minnow and nuzzled Smokey, the two mates purring affectionately. Minnow felt a twinge in her chest, but she shook it away.

"So why?" Jay asked, looking at Minnow. "Why not share the mice here? They're plump, even in leaf-bare."

Minnow shook her head. "That's your prey, yours and Smokey's. I can hunt for myself." She tried to sound firm, hoping they wouldn't pry.

A knowing look passed over Jay's face. "Alright," he conceded. "Whatever works for you."

Minnow suppressed a sigh of relief. She liked Jay and Smokey, she really did, but she was making an effort to keep her distance from them. It wasn't easy, not when the nest she slept in every night was just a few tail-lengths from theirs. But even in the several moons she'd been here, Minnow had never once felt a feeling of belonging. In the back of her mind was a nagging notion that this barn was just a stepping stone in her journey, rather than the new home she'd been looking for.

"I don't suppose you saw Apollo while you were out?" Jay asked, tearing her from her thoughts.

"No, I didn't," Minnow replied. To be honest, she hadn't really looked for him. He was another loner who came and went as he pleased, but Jay and Smokey always treated him like one of their own. Minnow didn't really care where he was, or what he was doing. She'd been far more focused on finding something to eat, even though that hadn't worked out too well in the end. She didn't

even *like* squirrels, and the one she'd gotten barely had enough meat to feed a kit. But she wouldn't complain; fresh-kill was fresh-kill.

Jay let out a purr of amusement. "With a pelt as black as his, you'd think he'd stand out in the snow," he mewed. Sighing, he added, "Oh well, he'll come around eventually."

"I just hope he's got some shelter from the snow," Smokey added, sounding concerned, as she looked out the entrance of the barn. The sky was dark, and the snow was falling even more thickly. Minnow could barely see the Twoleg nest. A feeling of weariness overcame her and she yawned.

"I'm going to eat my squirrel and go to sleep," she told Jay and Smokey.

Smokey nodded, and Jay eyed the scrap of red fur at Minnow's paws. "Well, if you're still hungry after that, go catch yourself a mouse," he told her.

Minnow picked up the squirrel and padded to her nest, falling heavily into it. She was tired, in more ways than one, and her stomach felt emptier than it had in moons. She took a bite, scrunching up her nose at the dry taste of the stringy animal. She finished the whole thing in a few ravenous bites and tried to get the barb-like hairs out of her mouth. She *was* still hungry, but she just curled up in her nest and fell asleep.

It was well into morning when Minnow awoke, and she rose from her nest with a yawn. She hadn't slept well, just like every night since she'd come here. For a short moment, she longed to be in her soft fern nest in the RiverClan camp, listening to the gentle lapping of the streams that surrounded the camp and the soft winds blowing through the reeds.

Stop that, she scolded herself silently. *Stop thinking about it.*

With a yawn, she stood and followed the sounds of Jay and Smokey's voices to their nests, where they were hunched over three very plump, delicious-looking mice. Her stomach growled before

she could say anything, announcing her presence.

Smokey purred. "Here," she said to Minnow, flicking one of the mice to her. "We caught you one."

Minnow immediately shook her head. "No, I can go out and hunt."

"Not in snow like that," Jay protested. "It snowed almost all night; you'd be up to your nose in it. You shouldn't go back out until some of it has melted." Though his words were firm, his expression was soft and concerned, and Minnow knew he wouldn't take no for an answer.

Minnow sighed and, after a long moment, settled down in front of the mouse. Jay and Smokey waited for her to take a bite before turning away, satisfied with her decision. It was very tasty, and Minnow had to admit that it was better than freezing her tail off.

No sooner had she finished her mouse did a voice sound at the barn entrance. "How can you all live like this?" Minnow turned to see Oliver, the Twolegs' kittypet, waddling towards them. His long, thick ginger fur was wet with snow, and his belly swayed from side to side with each pawstep. Minnow rolled her eyes.

"It's not so bad," Jay replied kindly. "You know we're used to it."

Oliver shivered. "If you say so. I wouldn't last one night in cold like this!"

"Well, we can't all have a cozy Twoleg nest to cuddle up in," Minnow mumbled, making everyone stare at her.

Smokey cleared her throat. "Would you like some mouse, Oliver?" she asked politely, pushing one towards him. "We have plenty."

Oliver scrunched up his nose in disgust. "I have food in my nest," he said.

"That slop?" Another voice sounded from high in the barn. The four cats cast their gazes upwards to see Apollo's amber eyes gleaming in the darkness from where he was perching on a beam. For whatever reason, the black tom preferred the unconventional entrance, from

a hole near the roof. He gracefully leaped down until his paws hit the ground, tail swishing. "I can't believe you eat that stuff," he said to Oliver.

Oliver shrugged. "It's not that bad," he meowed. "And I never have to worry about going hungry. My housefolk are very good to me." His tone was kind, and not at all condescending or defensive.

Apollo shrugged. "Well, I'll take fresh-caught mouse over brown pellets any day."

Minnow suppressed a growl. "You're a loner with a kittypet name," she said drily. "You're saying you've never had kittypet food in your life?"

"I didn't say that," Apollo replied nonchalantly. "I have. That's why I know I'd take a mouse any day." He eyed Minnow, as if he were waiting for her to argue with him.

"Well, there's plenty of mice here," Smokey cut in, pushing hers towards Apollo. "Here, Apollo, you must be cold and hungry. Take this; I'll catch another."

As the other cats settled in to eat and share tongues, Minnow curled up in her nest and stared at the wall of the barn. She had been here two moons already, and still felt like a stranger. In all honesty, she couldn't see a reason for her to be here. Surely this wasn't where she belonged. She sighed, knowing in the back of her mind that there was only one solution, one that she'd been thinking of for some time now. As soon as the snow melted and newleaf came, Minnow would leave the Twoleg farm in search of a new home.

Chapter 2

That evening, Minnow was restless and pacing the barn, itching to be under the cover of the night sky instead of the barn. It felt too artificial, too much like Twolegs and kittypets, not at all like forest life.

You don't live in the forest anymore, she told herself. Half of her was scolding, telling her to get used to it. But the other half of her was screaming to be free. *If I'm stuck out here, I may as well get to choose where I'm stuck at!*

Jay and Smokey had already settled into their nests to sleep, and Oliver had long returned to the Twoleg nest. Minnow padded quietly towards the barn entrance and poked her whiskers outside. The snow really was as high as her nose, and it was far too dry and soft to support her weight. Not feeling like trudging through it, Minnow turned her face towards the barn roof, looking at the hole Apollo used to get in and out. Sighing heavily, she made her way up, climbing strange wooden objects and cold shiny things, finally padding along a crooked beam, nearing the gap. She could see the night sky beyond, and the glittering of the stars and Silverpelt in the distance.

Pushing her way through the gap, Minnow emerged on the roof of the barn overlooking the massive Twoleg garden below. There was one light still glowing from the Twoleg nest, and the pond in the garden was frozen over and covered in snow. Only a slight dip in the white blanketed ground even gave away its presence. The air was still, and Minnow was thankful that there was no biting wind to freeze her whiskers off.

"Going somewhere?" A smooth voice came from behind Minnow, and she whipped her head around to see Apollo sitting a few tail-lengths away. Something about the way his amber eyes stood out against his dark coat was unnerving to her, especially when he was watching her.

"No," she said quickly, then backtracked. "Maybe. None of your business."

A faint gleam of amusement passed over Apollo's face, and the black tom shrugged. "Sure it's not," he agreed simply, looking away. After a long moment he added, gazing into the distance, "But if you're going for good, you should let some cat know. Jay and Smokey deserve as much."

Minnow was taken aback by his words and was speechless for a moment, thinking. What made Apollo think she was trying to leave? And so what if she did? She planned too anyways, just not tonight. She was free to go as she pleased. She didn't have to answer to any cat, not anymore. But where she thought that revelation would feel freeing, it just saddened her. The same feelings of guilt, grief, and remorse that she'd felt every day for the last two moons settled over her again, and her throat felt tight. She fought back a growl, suddenly angry, and raked her claws across the barn roof.

"If I leave right now, they'll figure it out," she growled. "I don't owe any cat anything," she added, although the words felt like a lie. Jay and Smokey *had* taken her in, and given her prey and shelter. But there was more than that, too. Didn't she owe RiverClan everything, after taking so much from them?

Stop it, she scolded herself again. Oh, how she wished she could just stop thinking about it! Why couldn't she leave her memories in the forest with RiverClan? Why couldn't she have stepped over the border and become a different cat, started over with a different life, with no lingering guilt and sadness for everything she'd done as a Clan cat? *Why, why, why?*

Minnow suddenly realized Apollo was still watching her. "You're a strange cat," he mused.

Minnow glared at him sideways but said nothing. Whatever he meant by that, she didn't care. What he thought of her didn't change what she thought of herself. She looked away from him, back towards the horizon and the forest that drew her attention. She could almost swear she heard the river bubbling in the distance, but she shoved the idea away. No, right now the river would be frozen

and silent. In the sky, the moon shone big and bright; it was almost full, which meant the Clans would be gathering at Fourtrees soon. What news would there be, she wondered? Which apprentices had become warriors? Which queens had given birth to healthy kits? Which elders had passed on to StarClan? Though she hadn't been gone long, Minnow had a feeling the whole forest was changing.

"For the better, if I'm gone," she found herself muttering aloud.

"What's that?" Apollo questioned, looking at Minnow quizzically. She cursed herself silently for voicing her thoughts.

"Nothing," she muttered.

Apollo sighed. "Fine, then. Keep your secrets, Clan cat."

Rage flashed through Minnow and she snapped her head towards him. "I'm not a Clan cat!" she hissed, ears laying flat.

Apollo didn't seem bothered. "Most loners wouldn't be so offended by being called that," he meowed. "You got something against the Clan cats?"

Minnow tried her best to ignore the itching in her claws, as well as Apollo's question. "What do you even know about them?" she asked, trying to steer the conversation in a slightly different direction.

Once again, Apollo shrugged. "Not much," he admitted. "I just know they're groups of cats who live together and take care of each other."

Minnow's throat tightened more. *Not always,* she thought sadly. Wanting nothing more to do with this, she stood and wordlessly slipped back through the hole in the roof, heading for her nest. "Good night," Apollo called after her. She didn't respond.

It was even colder when Minnow woke up the next morning, but to her delight that meant there was a layer of ice over the top of the snow, and she could walk on top of it. She almost leaped out of the barn, but a sudden wind blew across the clearing that chilled her to the bone. It was *freezing*! She padded out more slowly, her paw pads burning on the ice, and sat overlooking the Twoleg garden. It was

still early, which meant the Twolegs weren't awake yet and neither were their weird birds. Minnow drew in a deep breath of the icy air; it felt clean, and new, and filled her with energy. She wanted to *run,* to race across the top of the frozen ground with no destination and no purpose.

Standing, Minnow breathed in another deep breath, and suddenly her paws smacked against the cold ground as she raced away from the barn. Her legs carried her on the usual path she took to hunt, towards the forest. Once again, she wished leaf-bare would end so she could hunt for fish again. The rising sun glistened on the white snow and lit up her path as she ran up the hill, and her tail streamed out behind her. Last leaf-bare, she'd been a kit, nearing her sixth moon, awaiting her apprenticeship. Now, she was a full-grown cat, warrior-age, but on her own.

She skidded to a stop at the edge of the forest. There was a stretch of unclaimed territory between the treeline and RiverClan's land. That's where she hunted now, for whatever meager pickings she could find. Her lungs struggled to regain air, burning with the cold, as she stared into the distance through the forest at what had once been her home. *I should be a warrior now,* she thought sadly, unable to occupy her mind with anything else. She should be sleeping in the warrior's den, not a barn, surrounded by her Clanmates, not a few strange cats who had taken pity on her. None of this was right, and it never would be.

"It's not fair," she mumbled, her voice thick with emotion as her throat tightened. She stared at her paws, at the white flecks of fur that looked like snowflakes against her mostly-gray pelt. "It's just not fair." Her voice was barely a whisper.

She turned and looked back down the hill, at the Twoleg place. Watching it filled her with sadness and regret. She hated what her life had become, but she hated more that she had no control over it. She'd been cast aside by every cat she'd ever known and then some, she thought, remembering her visit with StarClan. The memory of it burned into her mind and she sunk her claws into the snow. Oh, how she hated StarClan for driving her out of the forest.

You've forsaken me, StarClan. She thought bitterly. *I'll never forgive*

you. If she ever saw StarClan again, she'd shred every hair on their starry pelts for condemning her to a life of exile. Every cat except... Flamepelt.

She missed him so much. All she could see when she closed her eyes at night was his lifeless body, and she couldn't escape feeling like his death was her fault. She knew all those deaths were her fault but she tried and tried to convince herself that she was innocent of Flamepelt's.

Because she loved him.

Minnow sat down once more, ignoring how cold her body was now. She loved Flamepelt with everything she had, and her love had been fruitless. Would he have tried to find her, she wondered, if he had been alive? Would he have looked for her beyond the forest? Better yet: would he have stayed with her, out here in exile? It made her almost happy to think that he might have.

Then reality came flooding back to Minnow. No matter what *might* have happened, she would never go back to RiverClan. She couldn't, not without watching the rest of them fall victim to her curse. She wasn't Minnowpaw anymore, or Minnow-anything. She wasn't a Clan cat, and she would never have a mate or raise kits in RiverClan or do anything else like that. Now, when she looked into the future, she saw nothing. She didn't know where she was headed, or what she would do, or even how long she would have to suffer alone before the inevitable end came to her. And even then, would StarClan welcome her?

Of course not, she thought. StarClan had cast her out before death, not that she wanted anything to do with them anymore. But what would happen when she died? Would she be subjected to that Dark Forest Frostfoot had told her about? *The cats who roam that forest are those who were not accepted to StarClan, for whatever horrible things they did while they were alive.* The StarClan warrior's words echoed in Minnow's mind. She'd done horrible things, and StarClan didn't want her. Her stomach sank; when she died, more than likely she would have to walk the Dark Forest.

Minnow shook her head. It did her no good to think about death

when she still had no plan for her life. No plan beyond leaving the Twoleg farm, that was. She began her journey back to the barn, trudging slowly with heavy paws and a heavy heart. And all the while, her mind was filled with shadows and darkness at thoughts of the past, and what the future might hold.

Chapter 3

The walk back to the barn was long, and every pawstep made Minnow more tired. It was so cold and Minnow hadn't eaten yet, so her stomach was growling. Her mind felt as numb as her paws, and a deeper weariness was settling in over her, the kind of weariness that weighed on her spirit. For a short moment, Minnow wondered why her life had ended while she was still alive.

As Minnow passed a bush on the way down the hill, it shook and a surprisingly plump rabbit hopped out onto the frozen snow. Minnow and the rabbit were equally startled, but Minnow thought quickly and pounced on it. It let out a shriek before she bit its neck, killing it. Its body was warm and meaty, probably the juiciest piece of prey she'd seen since leaf-bare began, and she would welcome such a filling meal. Feeling a little better because of the easy catch, Minnow crossed the last stretch of Twoleg garden to the barn, the tantalizing scent of rabbit filling her nose.

The sound of her pawsteps on the barn floor alerted Jay and Smokey of her return, and they jumped up as they saw her. Minnow could see Apollo laying on one of the wooden cubes above their heads. His tail swished as he watched everyone else, but he didn't lift his head from his paws. "Minnow!" Smokey exclaimed as she and her mate rushed over to Minnow. "Where were you?"

Irritation prickled Minnow's pelt, and before she could say anything, Jay added, "You just left without saying anything; we wouldn't have known where to look if something had happened."

Minnow dropped the rabbit. "I came back, didn't I?" she snapped. She was tired of every cat looming over her like a frightened queen! She was free to come and go whenever she wanted, and they didn't need to know where she was all the time! "If you're worried about me, save it! I'm fine!"

The looks on Jay and Smokey's faces told Minnow that she'd hurt their feelings, which only made her more frustrated. *My life*

shouldn't be any of their concern, she thought as she picked up the rabbit and trudged past them to her isolated nest. She felt Apollo's gaze burning into her pelt as she passed, but she ignored him. *They don't need to feel like they care about me.*

"Is this a bad time?" Minnow heard Oliver's voice as she sat down in her nest, and looked up to see the ginger kittypet standing a couple tail-lengths from Jay and Smokey. Minnow tuned out their conversation and began to eat her catch. As hungry as leaf-bare had made her, she suddenly felt no appetite, despite how delicious the rabbit smelled. She ate it anyway, knowing she should, catching glimpses of the other cats out of the corner of her eye. Jay, Smokey, and Oliver had settled on the ground and were talking, looking happy, while Apollo stayed laying above them, conversing as well. Loneliness tugged at Minnow's heart, and for a moment she longed for the evenings she had spent outside the apprentice's den with Sorrelstream, Mudpelt, and Flamepelt all those moons ago. Now one of those cats was dead and another hated every hair on her pelt. She briefly thought of Sorrelstream; did the sandy she-cat miss her? Or had she, too, begun to blame Minnow in the end? Minnow supposed it didn't matter, not now.

If I had stayed, would she have been the next one to die?

Minnow curled up in her nest, wrapping her tail around her nose, feeling sad. She wondered how easy it would be to run to Highstones right now, to put her nose to the Moonstone and demand that StarClan fix this whole mess. But then she realized that they probably wouldn't come to her, and that she would be risking the lives of RiverClan cats just by being within StarClan's reach. *I'll never beg StarClan for help anyway,* she told herself. Sighing, she closed her eyes and waited for sleep.

The next morning Minnow awoke and left the barn immediately, ignoring the stares of the other barn cats as she walked by, saying nothing to them. She was still in a sour mood, and found herself walking towards the snow-covered pond for no reason. She didn't feel like hunting, and she wasn't even hungry. Without territory to patrol and a Clan to feed, most of her days were boring and meaningless. As much as she was becoming accustomed to the life of a loner, she missed always being busy with tasks, always having

something to do.

Minnow turned her paws and headed a different direction, surprisingly towards the Twoleg nest. She saw no sign of the Twolegs yet, which was good; she tried to avoid them all the time, even though Oliver insisted they were nice and meant the barn cats no harm. They were still Twolegs, after all.

There was a small patch of ground behind the Twoleg nest that had been sheltered from the snow, and the cold grass was exposed to the air. Minnow sat there and stared at the blue-gray sky for a while, trying not to think. She felt the chill of the wind blowing over the tips of her ears and the sound of birds and squirrels in the forest, and the strange scent of Twoleg things. Everything was so different out here.

"Mind if I join you?" Minnow turned to see Oliver, his gaze kind. Though she wanted to say no, she just nodded. He sat by her and was silent for a few moments. Then he said, "You know, it's not that Jay and Smokey want to keep a paw on you at all times. They just care, that's all."

Minnow's ears twitched. Of course they'd told him. "I don't understand why," she responded without looking at him. "I'm nobody, and it's easier to just stay that way."

"Why?" Oliver inquired. When Minnow didn't answer, he meowed, "The two of them care about all of us. They care about me, even though I'm way better off since I live with Twolegs. They care about Apollo, who comes and goes. It's how they are. Maybe you don't feel like you deserve it, but they don't care about that. They'll look out for you either way."

Minnow's heart twisted at his words. Would they really look out for her, no matter what? If they knew who she was, where she'd come from, and the deaths she had caused, would they still want to protect her?

"It's not even about that," she mewed. "Yeah, it's kind of suffocating, but..." she sighed. "I just feel like I don't have any purpose." She wondered why she was bothering to tell him, but she went on

anyway. "I feel like I'm just surviving, for no reason. Do you ever feel that way?" After a moment she mumbled, "Well, I guess not. You're a kittypet."

Immediately she regretted saying it; her words had sounded so harsh and she hadn't meant it that way. "I'm sorry," she apologized quickly. "That was rude."

Oliver looked a little hurt, but he shrugged. "It's okay," he said. "I get how you can think that. I did, too, for the longest time. I couldn't figure out what purpose I could possibly have. But then I realized how much my housefolk love and need me; they'd be lost without me, and I'd be lost without them. My housefolk are my purpose. Anywhere they go, I'll be there for them."

It was strange to hear Oliver talking like that, but it almost made Minnow feel more alone. She was silent for a long while, thinking about purpose. When she left the barn come newleaf, would she find purpose somewhere else? Was there a home waiting for her somewhere, full of purpose? Minnow had a feeling that it wouldn't be like that, and instead she would forever be chasing a purpose that wasn't there. *But maybe, could I find purpose* here? She shook the thought away; it seemed even more far-fetched. The truth is the only thing that seemed to be waiting for her here each day was isolation, dread, and loneliness. She was almost sure that the farther she was from the forest, the better she would feel. Even so, she couldn't help but feel a little comforted by Oliver's words, or maybe just by having a cat to talk to. Either way, it was nice.

Chapter 4

Shortly after, Oliver returned to the Twoleg nest and Minnow decided it was time to go back to the barn and apologize. She felt bad for putting Jay and Smokey out, but knew that there had to be boundaries or else she would go crazy by the time newleaf came around. She didn't want, or need, them mooning over her the entire time she was here like she was some kind of helpless kit. For StarClan's sake, she was undoubtedly more equipped for survival alone than they were! Part of her wished she could tell them that, but she wasn't in a hurry to reveal her Clan roots, especially after Apollo's accusation. In her head, Minnow could see the smug look on his face about being right, a look she sometimes felt like clawing off. Still, she wished there was something she could say to make them quit worrying about her so much.

Minnow kicked up snow as she entered the barn, announcing her arrival. The three other barn cats were all there, laying around, and stood as she entered, looks of uncertainty on their faces. Clearly none of them knew what to say, if anything, and Minnow held back a sigh as she saw them. If there was anything she was good at, it was making messes like this.

She stopped in front of her companions and looked at her paws, absentmindedly flicking away a chunk of snow from one of her claws. "I'm sorry," she mumbled. Louder, she went on, "I'm sorry for being so rude to you. It was unfair of me. But I promise you have no reason to worry about me. I know how to take care of myself and..." she paused. "And if I ever need help, I'll ask." She finally made eye contact with her fellow cats, and waited for their responses.

Jay was the first to step forward. "We understand," he said clearly and softly. "We were a little quick to assume you were incapable of taking care of yourself."

"We know we were wrong about that," Smokey added, padding up to stand by her mate. "We're sorry. It's just in our nature to take care of each other around here."

Jay purred. "We're a family like that."

The word *family* cut Minnow deep, like the unforgiving claws of an enemy warrior. RiverClan had been her family, too, and over half of them had wanted her to be exiled. Some of them had maybe even wanted her dead. Her gaze dropped to the ground and sadness washed over her. She knew that it wasn't supposed to be that way, that whatever these cats had going on was genuine and true, but the prospect of becoming a part of it was unsettling, and it still reminded her of her old home in the forest. Once again, she felt a wall rising between them. And the thought of a barrier keeping her from connecting with these cats was almost comforting.

Minnow took a deep breath and let some of her feelings leave as she exhaled. "So we're clear that I don't need to be coddled?" she asked, the tiniest purr of amusement making its way into her meow.

Jay's ears twitched. "Clear," he said.

"Completely clear," Smokey echoed.

Minnow nodded at the two of them, overwhelmingly glad that this was all over. It seemed unnecessary, to have a conversation like this, but then again she was more than used to being alone and taking care of herself. Even in RiverClan, it had gotten to the point that no other cat looked out for her very much. And, Minnow thought, she was sure she preferred it that way. No cats to get hurt, no cats to hurt her.

Apollo, who had yet to offer a single word to the exchange, leaped nimbly down from his perch atop one of the giant monster's round black paws. It was unsettling how comfortable he was around the monster, considering how large, terrifying, and deadly they were. That was just something else about him that Minnow couldn't wrap her head around. The strange tom said nothing for a few moments, then opened his mouth into a crooked smirk and said lightly, "Who's up for a hunt?"

Minnow suppressed a growl. She'd actually half-expected him to supply something meaningful to the conversation, but of course that was foolish. She wondered if Apollo could ever take anything

seriously, or if he had just lived his entire life as an immature, smug loner without ever feeling the pressing weight of real problems bearing down on him. Part of her hated him for that.

Jay broke the short, awkward silence that followed Apollo's proposition. "Why not?" He meowed cheerfully. "Better yet, let's all go, and hunt together."

Smokey and Apollo voiced their agreement to the idea, but Minnow faltered. Hunting together? Like a patrol? It seemed forest life was still trying to chase her down. But hunting with these cats would still be a far cry from a patrol, and more than that, they weren't anything like a Clan. *It's not the same thing,* she told herself, almost believing it. "Sure," she finally responded. "Let's go."

The four cats left the barn and headed up the slope towards the tree line, silently gliding over the re-frozen snow on swift paws. Every few steps, one of them would pause to scent the air, and before they'd even made it to the forest Jay had spotted and caught a mouse. He kicked snow over it to conceal its scent before they moved on.

Minnow felt surprisingly at ease as the group slunk into the mass of bare trees, probably because of the informality of the hunting "patrol." Every cat was separating and going off in their own directions, not moving as cohesively as a Clan patrol would.

Minnow did the same, taking a right turn towards a scattered pile of limbs and the smell of rabbit emanating from within. She crouched and moved lightly over the forest floor, listening until she heard a confirming squeak ahead of her. When she was just a couple tail-lengths away, a white rabbit shot out of the pile and bolted in the opposite direction, but Minnow was ready for it. She launched, kicking up snow, racing after her prey like her life depended on it. She'd gotten rather good at running in her time here, having to adapt to the new prey. The rabbit didn't stand a chance and within moments Minnow had caught up with it, grasping it in her claws and biting its neck. It was much larger than she'd thought it was, but she wouldn't complain.

She dragged the rabbit back towards where she had split off from

her companions, finding that Smokey was already back as well, carrying a squirrel and yet another mouse. Her eyes widened at the sight of Minnow's rabbit. Setting her prey down, she praised, "Good catch!"

Minnow allowed herself to accept the praise, knowing that it was deserved; she would never have dreamed of trying to catch rabbits before, not when the river was full of readily-available fish. Rabbits were for WindClan cats, with their wiry bodies and impressive speed on the open moors. "Thanks," she purred, wondering if a WindClan cat would be as impressed. Her chest shook with laughter; as if she would ever care about the opinion of another Clan cat!

"What's so funny?" Jay stepped out of the forest and dropped a squirrel at his paws.

Minnow shook her head. "Oh, nothing," she replied, whiskers twitching. She felt light on her paws, calm and happy, as if hunting with other cats, even in a manner she wasn't used to, has rejuvenated her.

Jay and Smokey shared a confused glance, then they purred in unison. "I think we have plenty of prey," Smokey said, eyeing their catch, which was impressive in the dead of leaf-bare.

"I agree," Jay replied, shaking snowflakes from his broad gray shoulders. "Let's find Apollo and head home." Together, the three cats managed to catch Apollo's scent trail and followed it fairly deep into the forest, where the shadows of the trees darkened the ground, even though their branches were bare. Minnow wondered what had possessed the black cat to venture so far in, so close to the backside of the Clan territories. Part of her wanted to warn the loners of RiverClan's boundaries, knowing that Clan cats didn't take too lightly to strangers. But then she would be questioned as to how she knew any of that, and she'd be forced to tell them the truth that she was working so hard to keep covered up. So she kept her mouth shut and trudged through the snow after her companions, feeling weariness settle in over her through the cold. She wanted to get back to the barn as soon as possible, stuff herself with fresh-kill, groom her snow-filled coat, and curl up in the warm straw for the

night. But they had to find Apollo first. *Where in StarClan's name is he?*

At last they spotted Apollo's black pelt through the trees; he was stalking something, crouched low until the snow touched his chin, gazing intently at a branch several tail-lengths above him. Jay, at the front of the group, waved his tail in a signal to stop. The three watched in awe as Apollo made a massive leap and cleared an impressive amount of space to reach his claws around a fat blackbird, bringing it down to the ground in a shower of white snow and black feathers. He looked very pleased with himself, and Minnow was caught completely by surprise at his skill; she didn't know loners could hunt like that.

Then Apollo saw the three of them watching him, and his tail shot into the air like an excited kit. "Hey, guys! How's the hunting?" He called.

They padded closer to him. "Good," Jay said. "We're heading back now. Are you ready?"

Apollo nodded his head eagerly, picking up his blackbird. Now that they were all together, the headed out of the forest and grabbed the rest of their catch, descending back down the slope under the dusky sky. Minnow's mouth was full with prey, but she managed to mumble to Apollo, "That was a good jump."

His amber eyes lit up and he smacked her with his tail. "Thanks," he meowed around the bird. "Looks like you did well, too."

To Minnow's surprise, she once again felt the praise strike deep within her. Somehow, it meant something, and she felt good about it. Her tail was raised in the air the entire way back to the barn.

Chapter 5

It wasn't long before the full moon graced the forest with its presence again, lighting up the clear night sky and turning everything below into varying shades of silver. Minnow found it hard to ignore, just like every other full moon since her departure. Knowing that her Clan, and the other Clans, were all together at Fourtrees right now, while she was away, made her feel even lonelier. She knew how important it was that she stay away, and be dead to them, but her heart ached so much more during the full moon.

So she sat on the roof of the barn while her companions slept, watching the moon and glancing in the direction of Fourtrees, wondering what news was being passed around. Whatever ill will her Clanmates had wished upon her in her final days in RiverClan, she hoped they were thriving now, that the prey was running well despite the cold of leaf-bare. She hoped that greencough kept away from their camp and the kits were healthy. She supposed she would never stop caring about RiverClan, even if she tried her hardest to forget them.

A small movement from the ground caught Minnow's eye and tore her from the wandering thoughts. It was Apollo, leaving the barn through a hole in the back wall. His black pelt was sleek and gleamed under the moonlight, and he looked up at her briefly. His expression was impossible to read at this distance. Minnow simply narrowed her eyes at him and he turned away, padding into the distance. He was always coming and going, taking walks for the sake of being alone. She couldn't say she blamed him; even having spent her whole youth around so many other cats, she could never deny herself the peace of being alone. She just wished being alone didn't come paw-in-paw with crippling loneliness. Trying to ignore her feelings, she cast her gaze to the moon again and watched in silence. For just a whisper of a moment, she wondered if StarClan would ever try to reach her in her dreams. The smallest, most selfish part of her hoped so, and she watched Silverpelt above

waiting for an answer. None came.

Minnow stood, fluffing her pelt against the cold. *Good riddance,* she decided, feeling her bitterness and resentment towards her warrior ancestors blooming again. They didn't want her anymore, and she didn't want them. In her short life they had brought her nothing but suffering and misery, and even if she couldn't find the life she was looking for, it would still be better without their cruel interference. If that was all she could get, it would be enough for her.

The next day was still and quiet. The sky was gray but it seemed the thick clouds had gone, taking with them any chance for more snow. Minnow was grateful; there had been so much snow lately that she had to spend a lot of time in the barn, and she was growing restless. The hunting patrol with the other cats had helped, but she still longed for a more steady routine, one that kept her moving and busy, so that when she curled into her nest at night she was actually tired. She never had to do any real work anymore, just enough to keep herself fed. It was just something else she missed.

By the time sunhigh rolled around Minnow had walked to the pond and back three times, if only to get some exercise. She couldn't wait until newleaf came and the snow melted, when the pond would be revealed again and she could hunt for fish in it. She wanted to swim, wanted to feel the tug of the water at her pelt again and glide gracefully through it. She wanted to feel her paws churning and tail steering her around. It wasn't the river, bubbling its way through the forest and singing its soft, gentle tune, but she supposed it would do.

Minnow paused outside the barn entrance as a thought stopped her. Would she still be here when that time came? Or would she already be gone, leaving to find someplace that felt like home? She wasn't sure, and she didn't think she wanted to know just yet. All the uncertainty of it only made her anxious, restless, and sad. She gave her pelt a quick shake and entered the barn.

The warmth of the barn and the smell of hay immediately overcame her, and she had to admit that it was comforting. At least it was something she knew. She could see Jay and Smokey in the back, talking in lively voices with Oliver, whose tail was twitching as they

spoke. Minnow couldn't see him, but she knew Apollo was in the barn somewhere; she could feel his eyes on her, watching her like an enemy warrior over the border between Clan territories. She lashed her tail, the burn of his stare on her pelt aggravating. She finally looked up to her right and saw him perched on a high ledge, his stark black pelt nearly blending in with the darkness. The contrast of his bright yellow eyes was almost unsettling.

"Do you have a problem?" she asked him sharply, annoyed. She could see the faintest twitch of his whiskers as he stood and began to climb down.

"No problem here," he replied smoothly, his calm and smug demeanor prickling her nerves. He made it to the ground and stood eye-to-eye with Minnow. "I'm trying to figure out what's so special about that pond that you've been going there all day."

Minnow narrowed her eyes. "What's it to you?" Her heart thundered a bit. She couldn't hide that she was so drawn to the water, but it was a clear sign of her former affiliation with RiverClan. She couldn't let them find out who she was before.

Apollo shrugged nonchalantly, as if suddenly nothing bothered him. "So hostile," he murmured, sounding amused, then turned and padded towards their companions. He batted his tail against Minnowpaw's face teasingly, and she hissed at him, fighting the urge to draw her claws across his face. She followed him, instinctively drawn to the gathered cats despite her animosity towards them. She could see that Jay and Smokey were enthused, their faces lit up in delight.

"Apollo! Minnow!" Jay greeted them cheerily as they approached. "Since everyone is here, we've got some news!" He exchanged a look with his mate, full of love and eagerness. Minnow cocked her head, wondering what was so great. Even Oliver was kneading the barn floor with his claws in anticipation.

"We're having kits!" Smokey announced. There was a short pause as the other cats drank in the news, followed by cheering and congratulations from Apollo and Oliver as the pair basked in their happiness. Part of Minnow warmed at their declaration,

remembering the delight of a Clan queen making the same announcement. *Kits make the Clan stronger,* she thought to herself. She'd never given much thought to loners, let alone kits of loners, and she suddenly wondered what those kits would do when they were grown. Did they stay with their parents or wander off as loners themselves? It didn't seem like the life of a loner, even several who lived together as they all did, had much structure like Clan life. Kits didn't become apprentices to later become warriors. What was the point?

The notion of kits suddenly made Minnow very sad, and she couldn't pinpoint the reason. Her chest twisted and she took a step backwards from the group, puzzling. Very little made her happy these days, but she wasn't exactly sad all the time. Most days just blurred together in a haze of emotionless boredom. She eyed her paws, imagining little ones next to them, remembering Ripplekit, Sootkit, and Amberkit. She remembered Beechkit and Reedkit and Specklekit, who would be apprentices now. She remembered Breezekit, who had gone to StarClan too soon. But they didn't make her sad, not in the way she was suddenly feeling. It was like she was mourning... for her own kits.

"Minnow?" Smokey's soft voice caught Minnow's attention. She looked up to see the confused faces of her companions, watching her drift into some silent haze of unspoken grief. "Are you okay?"

Minnow blinked. She was the farthest thing from okay. "I'm fine," she lied, the words coming out in a mumble. Louder she said, "I'm really happy for you guys. Kits will be wonderful." It seemed to convince them well enough. But as Minnow strode past them towards her nest, she felt Smokey's concerned gaze following her.

She slumped into her nest of hay, tucking her nose under her tail for comfort. She thought once again of the future she'd abandoned, or rather been forced to turn her back on. Flamepelt's kind eyes flashed through her mind, and his scent seemed to wrap around her. Her heart ached with love and loss and for the first time since she'd left the forest, she allowed herself to really think about him. And about what they could have had.

They would have had kits. As sure as there would always be four

Clans in the forest, she was sure they would have had kits. How many, she wondered? Would they have been toms or she-kits? What color pelts would they have had, and what paths would StarClan have led them down? This was the one thing she had forced out of her mind because it was too painful to think about it, but now she was staring it in the face like a hungry fox. Some things, she realized, she might not be able to outrun.

"Minnow." The word was like a statement, not a question. She opened her eyes, trying to blink away the pain that she knew was so obvious in them. Jay was standing over her, his face twisted with worry. "I'm sorry," he breathed.

Minnow sighed, whispering, "What for?" She no longer had the energy to fight anyone, to guard her emotions, to keep them all from prying.

Jay sat, tucking his tail neatly around his paws. "I'm sorry if we upset you," he meowed.

Minnow raised her head to meet his gaze. "There's nothing wrong," she told him. "I'm really happy for you." She was being honest, even though it pained her to think about kits.

Jay didn't seem completely convinced, and he was silent for a few moments before saying, "I won't pretend to know what you've gone through, or what you're feeling. I just want you to know that none of us want to hurt you, or to make you upset. We're always here if you want to talk, or just want a friend." With that, he turned and walked away. For a couple of heartbeats, Minnow believed him.

Chapter 6

Newleaf hadn't quite arrived but there was a whisper of it on the breeze. Minnow left the barn one morning and felt that the air was warmer, and the piles of snow that surrounded the barn and filled the Twoleg garden were beginning to melt, leaving puddles of soft wet slush. She climbed onto the roof of the barn to avoid the uncomfortable wetness under paw, relishing the growing warmth of the sun as it rose higher in the sky. She sat in silence watching the world below. The twolegs' strange birds were waking, roaming their section of the garden on the other side of the twoleg nest. Oliver was being let out of the nest by one of the twoleg kits, and he headed straight for the barn. On the far horizon she could see a stretch of trees leading into the distance, and she heard the far-off roar of monsters on a Thunderpath.

Minnow closed her eyes and let the breeze ruffle her fur, letting her mind go blank. Fresh scents rolled from the forest and the moors, the scent of birch and oak trees, of crisp water and prey. Her stomach rumbled a bit, and she wondered if the other cats would be up for a hunt. Her eyes snapped open at the thought; did she actually want to hunt with them? Sure, she had enjoyed it previously, but only for the distraction from her lonely thoughts. She was surprised to realize that she wouldn't mind doing it again. Somehow Jay's words stuck in her mind, and the thought of having "a friend," as he'd said, was comforting, despite her reluctance to get too close to them all.

Minnow became aware that she was no longer alone on the roof, seeing Apollo out of the corner of her eye. She snapped her head towards him.

"Sorry," he meowed, sitting. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Interrupt what?"

Apollo shrugged. "It looked like you were having a moment." He

turned to walk away.

"No, it's fine," Minnow found herself saying. Apollo turned and looked back at her, seeming almost surprised. "I'm just enjoying the weather."

The black tom moved closer and sat a tail-length away from Minnow. "It's nice," he agreed, also looking out at the massive garden below. "It'll be great when all the snow is gone. Then maybe you can actually visit that pond you're so obsessed with." There was a hint of laughter in his mew.

Minnow's whiskers twitched the slightest bit. She supposed it couldn't really hurt for him to know her love of water. It didn't necessarily give away her past. "I grew up around water," she simply said.

Apollo turned his head, his expression curious. He seemed to know that she wouldn't say more, so he didn't press. "So what, you can swim?" he asked.

Minnow nodded. "And hunt for fish."

She saw Apollo's nose scrunch up in distaste. "Really?"

Purring, Minnow replied, "Really. There's nothing better than fish!"

Apollo didn't seem so convinced. He just said, "Hmm."

The two sat in silence for a while, and Minnow watched the pond. She could see the middle of it, the slightest bit of water peeking through as the snow melted. *I bet this place is nice in newleaf,* she thought to herself. She found herself looking forward to hunting in the water, and maybe even hunting in the forest still, with no snow to conceal the prey she'd become so accustomed to. Smokey would have her kits in newleaf as well. It looked like some *good* change was finally coming, and it made Minnow excited.

Then she remembered. Once newleaf was here and the weather was fit for travel, she would be gone. For a brief moment thinking about it made her sad and confused. The one time she got excited for something, it was something she wouldn't have. *Don't get upset,* she

told herself. *You don't belong here anyways.*

"Something wrong?" Apollo asked. His brow was slightly furrowed.

Minnow shook her head. "No," she said quietly. "I've just... got a lot on my mind." After a couple moments, she thought of something. "You've been spending more time at the barn lately. I thought you were the type to just pop in whenever you feel like it."

Apollo looked at her. "Would you want to travel in leaf-bare?" he asked.

Whiskers twitching, Minnow replied, "I guess not." *That's why I'm waiting for newleaf.*

Apollo went on. "I might be gone more when it's warmer. Would you miss me?"

Minnow whipped her head to look at him, glaring. His arrogant, taunting expression was back. "Not a chance," she growled.

He purred. "I might stick around, though, who knows? Jay and Smokey are nice, and I'm always welcome at the barn. You might just have to put up with me."

Yet another reason to leave, she thought. She knew Apollo wouldn't miss her when she left, not that she cared. It was Jay and Smokey that she suddenly worried about. She sighed. "I'm going to hunt," she announced, making her way towards the edge of the barn roof where she could easily reach the ground.

"Have fun," Apollo called after her, sounding almost genuine. She thought she heard something else, but she brushed it off and headed towards the forest.

Minnow lay awake in her nest that night, plotting her departure. She couldn't sleep, her mind crowded with countless thoughts. She could barely see Jay and Smokey curled up across the barn, and Apollo's soft snores sounded from his sleeping place on a low ledge. Everyone else had it so easy, she thought, not haunted by curses or a terrible past. "It must be nice," she muttered to herself, but she couldn't be bitter. She wasn't jealous of them. If anything, she was

happy for them. They had the life she didn't, carefree and happy. She could only hope that kind of life was somewhere out there for her, and all she had to do was find it.

Her mind wandered back to Jay and Smokey, knowing they would be hurt when she left. She almost hated to do it to them. They'd given her so much; they had shared their food and provided a safe place to sleep. She knew they cared about her, and part of her wished they didn't. They *were* like a family, the two of them, along with Apollo and Oliver. Jay and Smokey probably saw her as part of that family- that was who they were. Minnow felt like she at least owed them a goodbye and thanks, but that wasn't possible. The best way to go about it was to just leave, she decided. She could leave at night when no one was awake to see her, and just go until she felt like she'd gone far enough.

But where would she go? That question had been sitting in the back of her mind, brewing, since the moment she had decided to leave. She couldn't go back towards Clan territories because it would put RiverClan in danger. She supposed she could go in the direction of Highstones, but even traveling parallel to the Clans was unsettling. The last thing she needed was to be seen by a WindClan patrol, let alone recognized. That only left one option, she realized. She had to go in the direction she had started in, the one that brought her here. She remembered the stretch of trees she had seen from the barn roof that morning. *That's where I'll go.*

A faint rustling sounded as Jay turned over in his sleep. Minnow rested her chin on her paws, sighing. She knew they would miss her, and it pained her to make them go through that. She closed her eyes and waited for sleep to come, hoping that in time they would forget her, and that she would be in a place where she truly belonged.

Chapter 7

Within the next moon, as the weather grew warmer and all threat of snow disappeared with leaf-bare, Smokey had her kits. Minnow returned from a hunt to find the queen laying in her nest, shuddering with pain, as Jay comforted her with strokes of his tail. She dropped the vole she'd caught, as the pond water was still too cold for hunting, and strode quickly over to Smokey's side. "Are you alright?" she asked, concerned. Smokey's face was twisted with pain, and a small tremor wracked her body. Minnow had only seen a kitting once, when Ashflower had given birth to Ripplekit, Sootkit, and Amberkit, and there had been a medicine cat present then. Right now, Smokey had to do this all on her own.

"I'm fine," Smokey said through gritted teeth. Jay looked as worried as Minnow felt, and Minnow wished she knew something about herbs; she felt useless. Her claws kneaded the soft floor of the barn, tail twitching with anticipation and fear. Smokey's eyes were half-closed as another wave of pain rolled over her. "I think the first one's coming!" she announced.

Just then a small, wet bundle of fur rolled onto the straw nest. Jay immediately scooped up the little kit and put it at Smokey's belly. The queen grunted, and it wasn't long before a second kit joined the first. After a few moments of labored breathing, Smokey let out a sigh; it was over.

"You did wonderful," Jay purred, nuzzling his mate affectionately. The two kits were already nursing, letting out tiny mews as their paws worked Smokey's belly. "They're beautiful."

Minnow couldn't help but purr at the sight. Smokey had given birth to two strong, healthy kits, without the need of a medicine cat or herbs. *Thank StarClan nothing went wrong,* she thought. After a moment, she added silently, *Not that StarClan would care about loners.*

"What's going on?" Apollo's voice sounded behind Minnow, and she

turned to see him running towards the group. His eyes widened in excitement. "Your kits!" he exclaimed, purring loudly. He approached Smokey and leaned in towards the two little ones. "Good job!"

"Thank you," Smokey whispered, sounding tired.

Minnow stood. "We should give her some space," she meowed to Apollo, who nodded and took a few steps back. The two retreated a few tail-lengths away from Jay and Smokey, both purring with delight.

"It's wonderful," Apollo said to Minnow, his yellow eyes lit up.

Nodding, Minnow agreed, "It is. She's going to be a wonderful mother." A familiar pang of sadness hit her, and she tried to push it away.

Apollo was looking towards the barn entrance. "I'm going to go catch her some prey; she'll need to keep her strength up." Looking like an excited apprentice, he bounded away and out of the barn. Minnow had never seen him like this, and was surprised at his thoughtfulness.

As much as she knew Smokey needed to rest, Minnow couldn't help but wander back over to her. She was laying with her eyes half-open, purring like a thunderstorm as she watched her kits suckle. Jay radiated love and pride, his paw on Smokey's flank. Minnow approached slowly. She could tell that the two kits were already very strong. One was a very dark gray tom, and the other was a striking tortoiseshell. They seemed to be fighting for their mother's milk, and it made Minnow's whiskers twitch.

"Have you thought of any names?" she asked quietly. Her mind briefly wandered and she thought of what kinds of names they would be given in RiverClan, then shut the thought out.

Smokey lifted her head to look at Jay. "I'm thinking Storm for the tom," she mewed, followed by a loving purr from Jay.

"It's perfect," he replied. "And maybe the she-kit could be Rose?"

Smokey seemed equally thrilled with the name.

Stormkit and Rosekit. As much as Minnow tried, it was nearly impossible to not connect her Clan life and this one. Milk-scent surrounded her, along with tiny purrs and squeaks, and she was once again transported to the nursery; she could see Ripplekit, Sootkit, and Amberkit suckling at Ashflower's belly, too young to care about sickness or Clan rivalries. She pictured Cherryheart, shushing her own kits as they played. She remembered the excited squeals of Beechkit, Specklekit, Reedkit, and Breezekit, always running around and playing with stones or shells or feathers, daring each other to sneak into the other dens.

Breezekit. The black and white kit flashed through Minnow's mind; she had given him his first taste of water vole, an animal that would later end his life. She could see his convulsing body, the white foam at his mouth, and hear his choking and gasping for air as the poisoned prey took hold. His life was the second that her curse snatched away, and guilt coursed through her body. Cloudsplash and Cherryheart would never forgive her for the death of their son. Then again, she wasn't sure if she would either, if it had been her kit. If she ever had kits, she knew she would protect them as fiercely as she could, keeping them from all the danger of the forest, even if it cost her her own life. *Oh, Flamepelt,* she thought longingly. It felt strange to miss something she never had, but her heart ached anyway, once again thinking of kits.

That's just not in my future. Not anymore.

And even if she and Flamepelt had made it, she thought, with the curse hanging over her it would be too risky to have kits. They would be in danger until the moment her curse took them as well. It was too cruel for Minnow to keep thinking about. For a moment she wondered if it was safe to be around *these* kits, thinking about what Hawkshade had told her when she visited StarClan. *Death follows you like a shadow, but because it could not take you, it has taken those close to you.* Minnow shoved those words to the back of her mind. It meant those she cared about, not those who were physically near her. Either way, as long as she was out of StarClan's reach, no cats would be in danger.

"Minnow?" Jay said softly. "Are you okay?"

Minnow realized she'd been staring at the kits this entire time. She looked up to see concern in Jay's eyes, like usual. She wanted to hate him for always worrying about her, but she couldn't. As much as she had been trying to put distance between herself and everyone else, she knew deep down that she trusted Jay, and for the shortest moment she felt the urge to spill everything to him, to find solace in his promise of friendship. But she couldn't do that. It was already becoming difficult to maintain the wall between them, and if she dared get closer now then it would make it that much harder to leave.

"I'm alright," she sighed, trying to wipe the obvious sadness from her face.

Jay shook his head, looking almost amused. "One of these days you'll admit that you're *not* okay." Minnow stiffened, and he shrugged. "I won't push you, though."

"I'm glad for you two, really," Minnow meowed, sitting. "Your kits are strong and beautiful, and they'll grow up loved."

Jay purred. "Thank you, Minnow." He cast his eyes to Smokey, who had fallen asleep. Minnow almost winced at the pure love in his eyes. She supposed she was jealous of it, which she scolded herself for. That was completely unfair to them! "Do you ever want kits?" Jay asked her.

Minnow's heart dropped. She had been afraid some cat would ask her that. "I don't think so," she lied, struggling to keep her voice even. "Some things aren't for everyone, you know?"

Jay nodded slowly, his face displaying a look Minnow couldn't place. There was an awkward silence that followed, and Minnow couldn't think of anything to say. She was relieved when she heard Apollo's pawsteps behind her, and she turned to see him carrying a thrush in his jaws. He laid it down in front of Jay. "For Smokey," he said, "when she wakes up."

Jay's eyes lit up with gratefulness. "Thank you!" he said. He flicked

Apollo with his tail, and Apollo nudged him with his shoulder, an act of almost brotherly love. She said a quick farewell and padded away to get some space to herself.

They'll be okay when I'm gone, she thought, sitting outside the barn. The evening sky was lit up in a brilliant fiery orange that reminded her of Flamepelt's fur. *They have each other to look after. They can hunt and live together in peace, and raise two happy kits.* As the sun began to dip beneath the horizon, Minnow wondered if she really believed that or if she was just trying to convince herself of it. It didn't really matter, though, because she was leaving either way. She could tell that it was almost time, as if winds of change were blowing across the garden on every breeze, and it was nearly time to cross the threshold into a new life.

Chapter 8

It was time. Minnow waited for a dark night with no moon, and was pleased to see a decent amount of cloud cover as well to conceal her. Once the barn cats had turned in for the night, Minnow lay awake in her nest waiting until she heard their soft snores, confirming that they were asleep. She stood, stretching, and took one last look at her companions across the barn, feeling genuinely sad to leave them behind. She hoped that wouldn't be too hurt when morning came and they noticed she was gone. "Thanks for everything," she whispered, her voice barely a breath. Turning, she made her way as quietly as possible to the hole in the back of the barn, slipping out into the night.

Her pawsteps were noiseless as she strode along the soft newleaf grass, making her way through the shadows of the barn, eyeing the stretch of forest in the distance. She could barely see the pond in the darkness as she approached it, and stopped for a moment to take a drink. Shaking water droplets from her whiskers, she stole a glance at the barn and the Twoleg garden before carrying on.

Just past the pond, Minnow came to a strange row of what looked like little tree trunks, though they were too perfect and had no branches. Strung between them were rows of hard, spiky little tendrils that she prodded with a paw. *Twolegs,* she thought. The lowest tendril was far enough from the ground that Minnow could slip under with ease, and once she was on the other side, she felt an immediate sense of freedom. She felt light on her paws as she strode across the ground into unknown territory beyond all that she had ever known. Her mind wandered for a moment, wondering what could possibly lay ahead of her. What was the forest like? Would there be rivers or streams to hunt and swim in? What other kind of prey was there? Minnow also wondered if she would encounter any other cats, and if they would be friendly. Jay and Smokey had been friendly to her, but she knew that loners, and especially rogues, had a tendency to be more hostile towards strangers. She was thankful that she knew how to defend herself should she need to, but knew

that if any of those cats crossed her path, she would like to avoid fighting unless it was necessary. Too many cats had already died because of her.

Minnow had crossed roughly half of the expanse between the Twoleg garden and the forest, and she was surrounded by lush grass that was as high as her shoulders. She paused to scent the air, closing her eyes against a gentle night breeze that ruffled her fur. She could scent the water of the pond, various prey, the distant smell of the Twolegs' birds, and the forest ahead of her. Underneath it all, though, was another scent. It was one that was familiar and sour.

Minnow's eyes snapped open and she looked around her. She was alone, and for a moment she thought she had imagined it. She sniffed again, and now it was stronger, a foul stench that brought back the most painful memory. Warily, Minnow walked a few pawsteps back the way she came, diligently tracking the smell. Her heart thundered in her chest as she walked, and still the scent grew stronger. With a fearful start, Minnow realized that the scent trail was leading towards the barn.

Gasping, Minnow jumped up and raced back towards the Twoleg garden. She dashed across the ground, urging her paws to carry her faster. *I must have gone right past it!* The grass swayed and bent as she flew through it, and she nearly ran nose-first into the shiny tendrils before crawling back under them. As fast as she ran, it seemed like the barn still loomed in the distance, and the offensive smell in her nose sent alarms blaring through her mind. *It's so early in newleaf,* she thought. *A fox is likely to be starving! And the kits are so helpless!* A new wave of fear coursed through Minnow as she realized that the barn cats likely had no battle training. Every one of them was in danger!

After what seemed like an eternity, Minnow passed the pond and was in view of the barn. She ran like she'd never run before, skidding to a halt just inside the entrance to the barn. The clouds overhead had cleared enough that Minnow could see the scraggly silhouette of the fox, and the horrified faces of the barn cats just beyond. The fox stomped forward, growling with hunger and ferocity, and Minnow saw Jay step protectively in front of Smokey

and the kits, though he still cowered in fear. The fox lunged.

"Don't touch them!" Minnow screeched, flying at the creature. Memories flooded her mind as her claws sank into the fox's pelt, ripping at its coarse red fur. It snarled and flipped over, throwing her off its back. *It's huge!* She wasted no time in slashing her claws across its muzzle, its putrid breath making her eyes water. It descended on her and its jaws snapped just a whisker away from her face. She raked her claws down its chest while simultaneously ducking around the side of it, nipping at its shoulders and flank. She imagined she was swimming around it, streaking and wading through the air, twisting just out of its reach as she danced with the mangy animal.

The fox shrieked in anger and leaped at Minnow, unexpectedly bowling her over. She yowled in pain as she felt its teeth sink into her shoulder, and warm blood welled from the wound. The taste seemed to ignite a new fury in the fox and it bit down harder. Minnow screamed, lashing out with all four paws, striking with her claws wherever they landed. The fox was heavy on top of her and had yet to let go of her shoulder, and she squirmed beneath it. Taking a deep breath, Minnow kicked as hard as she could, claws extended, at the fox's underbelly. Its flesh tore open and it at last loosened its hold on her, wailing with pain. Seizing the opportunity, Minnow rolled away and jumped to land on her feet, facing the fox. She leaped at it again and raked her claws down its face, biting into its ear and kicking its flank with her hind claws. Every tooth and claw on her body was engaged in the battle, but the fox wasn't giving up.

Minnow jumped onto its back once more and held on to it, blood pouring from its body and she squeezed her claws in. The fox lashed and jumped around but it couldn't shake Minnow loose. Before she could think, it reached its jaws around, grabbed her by her throat, and threw her off of it, where she hit the wall of the barn with a thud. She gasped for air and struggled to stand, but she knew she had to. She had to protect them!

Summoning all of her energy, Minnow screeched a battle cry and flew one last time at the fox, fighting like an army of warriors, trying to weaken it so it would at least run away. She sank her teeth

into its side, digging her claws deep into its chest, and at last saw an opening as it turned to try and reach her, leaving its throat exposed. Not wasting a moment, Minnow reached for its neck with her teeth and bit down as hard as she could, grimacing at the heavy flow of fox blood that poured into her mouth. The creature let loose a deafening scream, crumpling to the floor. Minnow bit down harder before finally letting go, and the beast half-ran, half-limped out of the barn, screeching into the distance. It was over.

Flamepelt. I did it this time.

Minnow stood still, panting as she watched the entrance to the barn, praying the fox would not return. Her wounds burned like fire and she was bleeding heavily, and for a moment she was afraid that it had torn her ear. She reached a paw up to feel it; it was bleeding, but intact. She could feel the blood dripping from her shoulder onto her paws, and she knew it was a very deep wound. Her flanks were covered in scratches and her throat had been torn, and she breathed a sigh of relief that it was shallow. Her legs were wobbly and she almost toppled over, struggling to steady herself. For a moment the barn floor swayed beneath her, but she shut her eyes until the pounding in her head had subsided. She felt each ragged breath escape her, her fear turning to relief, and she felt herself returning to the present. She was alive, and the barn cats were safe.

Chapter 9

Silence blanketed the barn, interrupted only by Minnow's panting as her breathing evened out. Her wounds stung like fire but she was still standing. Her eyes were locked on the entrance to the barn, worrying that the fox might try to come back. She doubted it would, as injured as it was. After several long moments, she turned. "Is everyone okay?" she rasped to the barn cats, who still cowered in fear behind her.

Legs shaking slightly, Jay stepped forward. "We're fine," he meowed. His voice barely a whisper, he added, "You saved us."

One of the kits squealed, no doubt woken by the fight. Smokey hushed it gently until it calmed down, then gazed at Minnow with fear, admiration, and gratefulness in her eyes. "Thank you," she said.

"How did you learn to fight like that?" Apollo asked, stepping out from behind a pile of hay. His fur was fluffed out and she saw him struggle to make it lay flat again. His amber eyes were wide and she saw lingering fear in them, something she had never seen from him before.

Minnow's heart skipped a beat. She couldn't tell them the truth behind her fighting skills. "I just learned," she said quickly, hoping it was enough. But the barn cats seemed far more focused on the sudden fox attack than on her history of battle lessons, and none of them pressed.

"You saved our kits," Jay mewed, stepping forward to lick Minnow's head gratefully. "Thank you so much," he breathed.

Before Minnow could say anything in return, Smokey padded out to join her and Jay, her brow furrowed. "Weren't you in your nest?" she asked.

"What?" Minnow looked at Smokey.

The tabby's eyes were cautious. "You weren't sleeping in your nest," she said more slowly. "You came in from outside. You followed the fox?"

Minnow gulped. Jay seemed to catch on with what his mate was saying. "What were you doing outside?" he asked, more confused than accusing.

"I..." Minnow paused. There was no point in lying anymore. She sighed heavily, casting her gaze to the floor. "I was leaving," she admitted softly.

"Leaving?" Jay echoed.

"Why?" came Smokey's voice, hurt. Apollo said nothing, and Minnow knew that if she met his gaze, it would probably be smug and triumphant. After all, he'd guessed before that she was eventually going to leave. He'd been right.

"I was leaving because..." Minnow stopped again, weighing the words in her head. She looked up, and was surprised that there was no triumph on Apollo's face, only realization. Had he not really believed it? It *would* be like him, she thought, to just poke and prod and tease her. She pushed the thought away. "I was leaving because I didn't feel like I belonged here."

Hurt washed over Jay and Smokey's faces, and Minnow knew her words hadn't come across as she'd intended. Scrambling, she added, "You two have been great, really. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your kindness. But the barn never really felt like home. I thought maybe I'd be better off somewhere else."

No cat spoke a word, but Minnow could tell she had hurt them. With a start, she realized that this would have been how they felt in the morning, had she not had to come back to defend them from the fox. They would have been crushed, and that thought made Minnow feel like crow-food inside. She sighed again. "I scented the fox, and followed it a little ways, and when I realized it was heading here I couldn't help but come back. I didn't think any of you knew how to fight, and I knew that leaving helpless kits would weigh on me forever." The warrior code taught that all cats must

protect kits, regardless of Clan. Minnow knew she couldn't leave them to be eaten by a fox.

After a silent moment, Jay asked softly, "Are you still going to leave?"

Minnow met his eyes, fumbling. Would she? "I don't know," she found herself saying. Her chest felt tight with emotion. These cats had, in a way, protected her, and now she had protected them in return. It felt almost... right. She looked into Jay's eyes and knew, once again, that he was a cat she could trust, and Smokey as well. She knew Apollo was an antagonizer, but he'd never done anything wrong to her. She remembered when she had almost given in and spilled everything to Jay, when he had offered his friendship, and found the same fear of closeness returning. This time, she knew she had to face it.

Minnow met the barn cats' gazes evenly. "I wanted to leave. I felt like I *had* to, like I had to keep running, like when I came here. She hesitated, then went on, "I wanted to leave before I got too attached to you all. But now I realize I already have." Something sparked in her chest, and saying those words felt good.

A purr escaped Smokey. "We want you here, Minnow. We really do."

Jay nodded. "What you do with your life is your choice," he meowed. "But when we say you're welcome here, we mean it. We like you, and this barn can be just as much your home as it is ours. Maybe you don't have to look as far as you think to find where you belong."

Apollo at last came forward. "And if you *do* stay," he said, sounding a little mischievous, "maybe you can teach us some of those battle moves."

Minnow's eyes widened. "None of you know how to fight," she said, more of a statement than a question.

Jay shook his head. "That fox would have killed us all, and our kits, too." His gaze darkened.

Minnow shook her head, silently scolding herself. "I was stupid to think I could just leave you. I was lucky to catch up to that fox." She couldn't imagine what would have happened if she had been too late, if she had come back to a scene of blood and death. Or worse, if she had ignored it and carried on, always wondering if the barn cats were alive and dead. *I'm a fish-brain,* she thought. "I can't leave you," she said matter-of-factly. "I have to teach you how to fight."

Smokey's eyes widened. "Really?"

Minnow nodded, knowing it was the only thing to do. "Of course," she replied. "I can't bear the thought of you all being helpless; who knows how many hostile animals are out there? How many more foxes?"

"Do you think that one will come back?" Jay asked.

Minnow thought about the wounds she had given the beast, and how she'd torn open its throat. "With those wounds," she said, "it's likely to limp off and die." She felt no remorse at the thought, knowing that it couldn't hurt any cats.

Smokey shuddered. "It was terrifying," she whispered. She gazed lovingly at her kits. "I want to be able to protect them," she said.

"Me, too," Jay agreed immediately. Minnow saw Apollo nod firmly.

"Then I'll teach you," Minnow said. She felt light on her paws, almost excited at the prospect. She remembered her previous conversation with Oliver about purpose. Was this *her* purpose? She wondered. Whatever it was, it made her feel important. It made her feel needed. She purred. "I'll teach you how to fight."

Chapter 10

The sun shone bright overhead as Minnow began the first training session with the barn cats. Three days had passed, and Minnow's wounds had healed, luckily without the use of herbs. She'd been worried about them getting infected, since she didn't have any idea what plants might be used to treat them. For a moment, she wished Silverheart were there; she missed her silver friend, the beautiful medicine cat apprentice of RiverClan. Silverheart had been one of the only cats to stand by Minnow's side in her final days in RiverClan, trying to shield her from the distrusting glares of their Clanmates and eventually ushering her towards the Moonstone for answers. Minnow hoped that Silverheart didn't miss her too much, and that she hadn't faced any backlash from RiverClan for supporting her.

With her wounds now healed, and only a few aches to remind her of the battle with the fox, Minnow was more than ready to be up and about again. She knew battle training would loosen her stiff muscles and give her something to do besides hunt. She padded towards a flat, clear area of grass a few tail-lengths from the pond, with Jay, Smokey, and Apollo behind her. Oliver had surprisingly offered to entertain the kits for a little while. Minnow was glad they wanted to train, and even more glad to be the one to teach them. She knew her hurry to leave the barn behind was just a way to dodge the feelings that she was so afraid of, but now she knew it was fish-brained to run away. She had grown to like her companions, and she was glad that they had put up with her long enough to let her figure that out.

"Okay." Minnow stopped, turning towards the other cats. "We'll start with some basic moves. When fighting, it's important to be fast. You want to be out of your enemy's way before they can land an attack on you. Being quick can also help you to escape easily if you have to. Who wants to go first?"

Jay, Smokey, and Apollo looked at each other, both excitement and

uncertainty in their eyes. At last Jay stepped forward. "I'll go."

Minnow nodded to the gray tom. "Alright, I'm going to try and attack you," she told him. His eyes flashed in alarm, so she added reassuringly, "Claws sheathed. We'll never practice with claws out. I want you to dodge every move. Try to stay light on your paws and move before I can touch you. Don't worry about fighting back yet, just dodging. Got it?"

Jay nodded. Minnow braced herself and saw him do the same. Taking a deep breath, she jumped at him, far slower than if he were an actual enemy, and reached forward with her front paws to tag him. Faster than she had anticipated, he slid to the side. She turned sharply and was on him again, this time aiming for his forelegs. She nearly caught him off guard, but he managed to leap over her and avoid her attack. Minnow was surprised, but wasted no time in launching another attack, aiming to land on his shoulders to pin him to the ground. This time, Jay managed to duck and roll sideways, sending Minnow crashing onto the dirt.

She paused, panting. "You have good reflexes," she praised, a little shocked that he had managed to avoid every attack. "Who's next?"

Apollo stepped forward, and Minnow ran through the same moves with him. He was nearly as good as Jay, but while Jay was more lithe, Apollo was taller and heavier. At times he was a little clumsy, especially when Minnow was able to move around him, slippery like a fish. He'd avoided every move until the last one, where she was able to grab his long tail in her teeth. "Good job," she told him. "Remember to keep your weight evenly balanced; that makes it easier to move and stay steady on your paws, and you won't have to worry about stumbling or hesitating while you regain balance."

Apollo nodded, his amber eyes alight. He seemed to be enjoying himself. Lastly, it was Smokey's turn. Minnow expected her to be softer, a little more wary of being attacked, but it seemed that Minnow underestimated her. She was as quick as Minnow, and just as nimble, and like Apollo she managed to dodge every attack but the last one, where Minnow jumped onto her back and pretended to dig her claws into Smokey's flanks. The two she-cats stopped their fight and turned to each other. "Good!" Minnow purred. Her victory

at the end was likely the result of many moons of experience, as Smokey was a natural. Every one of them seemed to have a fighting spirit.

"You guys have the basics down," Minnow told the three cats. "I think we can easily move onto some battle moves."

No cat objected, and in fact they all seemed more than eager to learn, which made Minnow's heart swell. They moved slowly, since each cat took a turn with Minnow, and only made it through a couple battle moves before sunhigh. They all made excellent progress, though, and Minnow was beyond impressed. More than that, she was tired. Training three cats at once was exhausting, and by the time the sun was high overhead, she was ready for some fresh-kill and a nap in her nest. "I think that's all for today," she panted after she and Smokey broke apart from their mock fight. Her paws were sore and her pelt was ruffled from training, as were her companions. They all looked a little disappointed for a moment, but Minnow said, "You're all doing amazing. We can do more tomorrow."

The four cats padded back towards the barn, and Minnow's belly growled with hunger. Hearing it, Apollo purred in amusement and turned his gaze towards her. "I think I'll go hunting."

Minnow shook her head. "I can hunt," she meowed.

"I don't mind," Apollo replied. "You did three times as much work as any of us. I won't be long!" Before Minnow could protest, he had bounded away towards the forest, black tail streaming out behind him.

Secretly, Minnow was glad that she didn't have to hunt. While she didn't want to be waited on, the last thing she felt like doing was stalking through the forest for prey. She followed Jay and Smokey into the barn, when Oliver's orange pelt caught their gazes. Excited squeaks were coming from the kits as Oliver teased them with his tail, making them jump to catch it but snagging it away at the last moment. A deep purr of amusement rumbled in his throat, and Minnow was surprised at the almost fatherly softness she saw in him.

"Hey, you're back!" Oliver greeted, looking up at the returning cats. At his exclamation, Storm and Rose leaped up and raced to Jay and Smokey, jumping onto their forelegs and trying to climb them.

"Hello, my loves," Smokey purred lovingly. Jay bent down to allow Storm to clamber onto his back for a ride.

"We missed you!" Rose squeaked, reaching up to rub her muzzle against Smokey's.

Only a moon old, Storm and Rose were already growing so much, getting bigger by the day. Minnow supposed they would be ready for fresh-kill before they knew it. She wondered for a moment if Jay and Smokey would want to teach them battle moves, too, before shoving the thought away. They weren't apprentices, and even then they were nowhere near old enough to even think about fending for themselves. They would likely always have their parents to help and support them, to teach them and love them. Minnow then thought of Bristlepelt, her father of few words, who had always stood up for her, and then Ashflower, who would have gone to StarClan and back to fight for her. Minnow suppressed a sigh; she was glad these kits had as good of parents as the ones she had left behind.

Turning her attention back to the present, Minnow saw Storm and Rose settling down to nurse, no doubt exhausted from a long morning of playing with Oliver. The orange kittypet was talking enthusiastically with Jay, and his ears were pricked with interest as Jay described some of the battle training they'd done. His yellow eyes widened. "Do you think you'll ever actually have to fight?" He breathed.

"Hopefully not," Jay said, looking past his friend to where Smokey was now asleep in her nest, curled around their kits. "But I never want to feel as vulnerable as I did when the fox showed up. I need to be able to protect my family." He turned his head to Minnow. "I still can't imagine what would have happened if you weren't here." His gaze softened.

Minnow's pelt grew hot with embarrassment. "I would have helped any cat," she murmured. "Foxes are vicious."

Oliver cocked his head, looking intrigued. "Have you fought one before?"

An image flashed through Minnow's eyes; scraggly russet fur tangled with bright orange, shaking Flamepelt's body like prey. She remembered the beast's growls and screeches, the hot scent of cat blood, the shock and fury coursing through her as her claws ripped mercilessly at the creature. She tried hard not to shudder at the memory, not knowing if she could, or should, tell them about it. She hesitated. "I—"

"I'm back!" Apollo's muffled voice sounded behind them. He padded awkwardly towards the group, carrying an impressive catch: a sparrow, a blackbird, and a squirrel.

Minnow widened her eyes. "Wow," was all she could say. She wasn't sure even ThunderClan warriors could catch that much prey in such a short time.

Dropping the fresh-kill on the ground, Apollo looked at Minnow. "You get first pick," he told her, taking her by surprise.

"Oh, uh," she stammered. "Anything but the squirrel." She'd be picking barbed hairs out of her teeth for a moon!

Apollo picked up the blackbird and passed it to her, where she accepted gratefully. It was still warm, and felt very meaty despite being covered in feathers. Jay disappeared behind a pile of straw and returned after just a few heartbeats carrying a large mouse by the tail. Minnow never ceased to be amazed at the number of mice in the barn, that they could just hunt easily whenever they wanted. With the blackbird in her jaws, she turned and began padding towards her nest to eat it, then paused with a frown. Her gaze passed between her nest and everyone else's several times. She had made it a point to stay away from them previously, but now her nest seemed *too* far away, and lonely. Turning her back on it, she scraped some hay off a pile and pressed it into a new nest, just a couple tail-lengths from Jay and Smokey's.

She felt the other cats' gazes burning into her pelt as she sat down with the blackbird, but none of them said anything about it.

Everyone sat down to eat their fresh-kill, except Oliver, who scrunched his nose, and Smokey, who would eat when she woke. As Jay, Apollo, and Oliver shared tongues, Minnow picked the feathers away from the surprisingly tender flesh of her blackbird and allowed her mind to wander.

She was still surprised at how quickly the barn cats learned what she had taught them, and wondered what she should teach them next. She thought back to all of her battle training with Tawnyclaw. What would he do? As she thought, her mind slipped from battle training to memories of her beloved mentor. For the longest time, all she had wanted to do was make him proud, and become an amazing warrior that was a testament to his skill as a mentor. She missed him so much; she missed his skill, his firm but gentle way of mentoring, and just his presence. He had always believed in her, and had urged her to believe in herself even as her life spiraled wildly out of control. She wondered if he really had given up in the end, but if he had, she'd never blame him for it. She just couldn't.

Minnow then wondered if she was the last apprentice Tawnyclaw would ever have. He wasn't exactly a young cat anymore, and even though he was probably still moons away from retiring to the elders' den, he probably wouldn't have the energy to take on another apprentice. She sighed, wondering what kind of legacy he was leaving if his last apprentice had turned out to be a miserable failure, a deadly threat to RiverClan, an outcast presumed dead.

Maybe I can make it worth it, Minnow thought with a tug in her chest. Maybe, in some small way, she could do Tawnyclaw justice by using what he had taught her to train the barn cats. Maybe his hard work wouldn't be for nothing. He would probably never know it, but the thought made Minnow feel a little better. She wished she could have said goodbye to him, probably above any other cat in RiverClan. *I'll try, Tawnyclaw,* she said silently. *I will.*

Chapter 11

Paws scuffed grass and Minnow's breaths escaped in short pants as she battled with Apollo. They had been training for nearly half a moon, and even though Minnow felt that there was a lot more to teach them, they all continued to amaze her. Their willingness to learn and their real knack for adapting to everything Minnow taught them made her feel proud.

Minnow ducked as Apollo flew at her, narrowly missing his paws as they skimmed a whisker away from her ears. He landed on his paws behind her, and turned sharply, managing to maintain balance and quickly slide across the ground, aiming to scoot under her. Too slow, Minnow leaped out of the way, and Apollo managed to wrap his large forepaws around her hindquarters and drag her crashing to the ground. Before she could get up, he had her pinned to the ground by her shoulders. "Gotcha!" he exclaimed.

"Alright, alright," Minnow muttered into the ground, trying to catch her breath. "No need to rub my nose in it."

She heard Apollo purr with mischief as he put a paw on her head and literally rubbed her nose on the ground. Growling, she leaped up and batted at him good-naturedly with a paw. "Cheeky!"

Jay and Smokey were sharing a purr of laughter as well, having finished their own mock battle. Minnow had started separating the four of them into pairs to practice battling with each other, and it was working very well as each cat adapted their own style. Minnow was impressed at the move Apollo had just used on her; it was a purely RiverClan battle tactic, one that the other Clans weren't smooth or nimble enough to master. It worked extremely well when fighting in the water, but if used right could be equally useful on land, as Apollo had just demonstrated.

The sun was rising higher in the sky, and with newleaf in full bloom, it was growing warm quickly. Pleased with everyone's progress, Minnow decided to call it a day. "I want to go hunting,"

Smokey announced. "I haven't been since the kits were born."

Jay nodded to his mate, touching his muzzle to hers. "Of course," he said to her. "I'll go watch the kits. I'm sure they've worn Oliver out."

Everyone purred at that. Though he was a kittypet, Oliver managed to fit in with the loners very well, and was always willing to watch Storm and Rose while everyone else trained. The growing kits made Oliver more active, and Minnow could tell that he had actually slimmed down a little. *Maybe one of these days he'll join one of our training sessions,* she joked to herself.

As Smokey wandered away towards the forest, Jay and Apollo headed towards the barn, stopping to look back at Minnow. "Are you coming?" Jay asked, flicking his tail.

"I'll be along later," she told him, and the two toms left. Minnow looked over her shoulder towards the pond several fox-lengths away. She had been so busy since newleaf arrived that she hadn't been able to visit the water, but every hair on her pelt was itching to. The water called to her like a mother to her kits, and she broke into a trot as she approached it. The cool water lapped lazily at the edges of the pond, and Minnow was overjoyed to see the shadows of fish flitting back and forth beneath the surface. She dipped one paw in to test it, relishing at the feeling. She strode forward to stand in the pond, water halfway up her legs, and sighed with pleasure. It had been so long since she'd felt the caressing touch of water. RiverClan or not, she was a cat who belonged in water.

Minnow moved until she was belly-deep in the pond, letting the small waves carry her off her paws until she was churning through the water, swimming a wide circle around the edge. She closed her eyes as she swam slowly, letting the water carry her thoughts away. Oh, how she had missed this. After a few moments, her belly growled, and she moved back towards the edge and stood on the muddy pond floor, watching for fish. The ones here were a little smaller than the ones in RiverClan territory, and their scales weren't as silver or bright, but they also moved slower and more lazily, which Minnow knew would make them easier to catch.

As Minnow spotted a fish swimming towards her, she double-

checked that her shadow was behind her before gently lowering her muzzle to the surface, keeping her whiskers still. After a couple heartbeats, the fish was just within reach, and faster than lightning she dipped her face into the water, closing her jaws around the slippery creature. It was almost too easy, and she quickly gave it a killing bite, surprised at the rich, sweet taste.

As Minnow turned to toss her catch onto the bank, she caught Apollo watching her from a short distance away. The look on his face was almost unreadable, and he closed the distance between them as Minnow dropped the fish. "*That's* why you were so interested in the pond?" he asked, sounding almost alarmed.

Minnow let out a *mrrow* of amusement at the black tom's reaction; she wasn't sure until now that anything could really faze Apollo. "What, you've never seen a swimming cat?" she teased.

Apollo shook his head, his eyes fixated on Minnow as she paddled in the water. "How do you do it?" he asked. "Is it hard?"

Minnow shrugged. "Not once you learn. Care to try?"

She watched Apollo hesitate, uncertainty clouding his amber eyes, before he gingerly took a step forward and allowed the water to lap at his claws. He jumped backwards, and Minnow fought back laughter. Ignoring her, Apollo moved forward again until all four paws were in the water. "This is weird," he admitted, his face twisted as if he wasn't sure how to feel about it.

Minnow turned in a circle, allowing her tail to steer her. "Oh, it's not that bad," she told him, coaxing him forward. "Just pretend you're walking, but in water."

Slowly, Apollo moved forward, looking a little uncomfortable as the water tugged at his dark fur. Minnow watched as his paws left the bottom of the pond, and he treaded lightly for a few moments until his muzzle went under.

Apollo fought as he pulled his head out, sputtering water. Minnow couldn't contain herself. "Make sure to keep your head up!" she meowed, purring loudly with laughter.

"You don't say," Apollo growled in return, droplets dripping from his whiskers as he concentrated hard on moving his paws. He managed to make it a few strokes forward, then awkwardly turned, attempting to use his tail as a rudder like Minnow had. "Okay, I think I'm getting the hang of this," he said quietly, focusing intently on each paw stroke.

Minnow swam forward to end up in front of him, leading him slowly around the edge of the pond. She had to admit, it was a little surprising to see him putting so much effort into something so new and strange, but it was just as fun to teach swimming as it was to teach fighting. After a little while, the two cats had made a full lap around the pond, then dragged themselves out onto the bank.

"That was almost fun," Apollo said lightly, purring.

"Yeah, you wouldn't be a half-bad RiverClan cat," Minnow replied mindlessly, heading to pick up her fish. She realized her mistake too late, though, and froze. *Oh, no.* She snapped her gaze towards Apollo, who was watching her with a look of calm calculation. She met his gaze coldly, angry with herself. She had let her guard down, and out slipped her biggest secret. What a fish-brain she was!

"So I was right," Apollo breathed, not sounding as shocked as Minnow imagined he would. "You *are* a Clan cat."

Minnow growled, narrowing her eyes. Her tail lashed behind her. She was furious with herself. "I *was* a Clan cat," she said through gritted teeth. "Not anymore." The last words came out far sadder than she had intended, and Apollo seemed to notice. She looked away, half in shame, murmuring, "That's all there is to it."

A moment passed, silent, before Apollo said, "Okay." She peered at him out of the corner of her eye. His sodden pelt dripped onto the soft newleaf grass, his paws neatly in front of them, a calm look of nonchalance on his face.

"What?" she said. He wasn't going to pry for an explanation?

Apollo shrugged. "Your past is your business, not mine," he told her. "Who am I to demand more information?"

Minnow lifted her head, at a loss for words. She found it hard to believe that he would let it go that easily, but a second look at his face confirmed that it was true. *Does he really not care?* She wondered. *Or is he just being respectful enough to leave it be?* Either way, Minnow's heart lifted. She was glad. "Thank you," she whispered. She still wished the words hadn't slipped out of her mouth, but another part of her felt strangely relieved that at least *some* cat knew of her origins. Though, apparently, he had had a hunch, and Minnow remembered his first accusation. She had thought maybe he was just antagonizing her, as he usually did, but had he actually thought so? Well, now he knew. And he didn't care.

Minnow bent down to pick up her fish, her stomach rumbling again as the tantalizing scent hit her nose. She shook her fur, the heavy drops of water scattering and spraying Apollo in the face. "Hey!" he protested, before doing the same. Minnow ducked as water rained from his direction, and began to pad away towards the barn. She saw the lithe, gray shape of Smokey descending the hill towards the forest, and it looked like she was carrying a fat rabbit. She looked up and, seeing Minnow and Apollo approaching, waved her tail happily in greeting.

"Nice rabbit!" Apollo called as they drew nearer, bounding past Minnow to Smokey.

Smokey set down her catch. "Is that a *fish*?" She was looking past Apollo at Minnow, eyes wide. "Have you two been swimming?"

"Well, Minnow's been swimming," Apollo replied. "She taught me a bit. And she caught a fish."

"Huh," Smokey said.

Minnow purred again, finding it humorous that what came naturally to her was bewildering to her companions. It was surprisingly refreshing. "I like the water," she said to Smokey around her fish.

Smokey nodded. "That's kind of cool," she conceded before picking up her rabbit again. Together, the three cats made their way back to the barn. The sun shone warmly overhead, quickly drying Minnow

and Apollo's pelts as they walked, and it made Minnow begin to feel sleepy.

She could still hardly wrap her mind around Apollo's willingness to let the incident go, even though he had just discovered she'd been lying to them. Even Smokey didn't seem to be too bothered by Minnow's love for water, and her ability to swim and catch fish. Back in the forest, the other three Clans always sneered at RiverClan for those things; if they weren't being *called* fish, they were being told they smelled like it. Even though ThunderClan, ShadowClan, and WindClan fully knew that the river was like the oak forest, moor, or pine forest to RiverClan cats, it always seemed to be a big deal. Here, it wasn't. Here, they weren't enemies, and their differences weren't something to look on in contempt. Out here, they were mutuals, and every cat had their strengths and preferences and were entitled to them just as much as the others. Minnow's heart swelled.

They were friends.

Chapter 12

The days continued to pass and Minnow felt more at ease with her new life with each one. It felt strange, she realized, to no longer be wishing for the life she used to have, and the life she thought she'd been destined to live. After all, what Clan cat could ever imagine an existence beyond StarClan's reach? But ever since Minnow saved her friends from the fox, found purpose in teaching them to fight, and accidentally revealed her secret to Apollo, she began to feel like *this* was her life, and it was supposed to be that way. She spent her mornings training with the other cats, teaching them new and more advanced moves, challenging them as they challenged her. After training they would hunt together in the forest, and sometimes Minnow would hunt alone in the pond, still unable to coax the other cats into trying fish. They would play with Storm and Rose and lay lazily under the newleaf sun in the Twoleg garden. It was an easy, gentle life, and Minnow was grateful for it after so many moons of suffering and pain.

The one thing Minnow felt guilty about, though, was Flamepelt. As the days passed she thought of him less and less, and she wondered if she was forgetting him or simply learning to live without him. As she snoozed in the sun with her companions one day, she wondered for the first time if it had been selfish of her to move on from Flamepelt and RiverClan. StarClan had told her to do it, and she still felt a kernel of anger for it, but she couldn't help but feel like there was some way to end her curse, and that maybe she'd never actually *had* to leave the forest. She would probably never know.

Minnow was torn from her cozy rest as two small bodies crashed down on top of her, squealing with laughter. "Minnow! Minnow!" Storm called her name, pressing on her flank with his tiny paws. Purring, Minnow opened her eyes and sat up to face the two kits. They were nearly two moons old now, and they were full of life and energy, and Minnow knew without thinking that she loved them. They had already developed strong and independent personalities; Storm was outgoing and adventurous, and faster than Minnow

knew a kit could be. Rose was playful but more laid-back, and she liked to find little places in the barn to hide in before jumping out and "attacking" the older cats. Minnow could see Jay watching from a couple tail-lengths away, whiskers twitching in amusement.

Rose had climbed onto Minnow's shoulders. "I want a ride!" she exclaimed. Unable to tell her no, Minnow gently got to her paws and carried the tortoiseshell she-kit around, wincing as her razor-sharp claws dug into Minnow's pelt. Storm followed, clambering clumsily around Minnow's paws.

"Watch out!" she warned him. As she said it, he tripped and tumbled head-over-tail in a whirl of gray fur. Immediately Jay was by his side, nosing the little tom to his paws. Storm seemed unbothered, though, and immediately bounded away to play elsewhere.

Jay rolled his eyes at Minnow. "Kits," he purred, and Minnow's whiskers twitched. Rose had laid her chin on top of Minnow's head, paws pushing down on her ears, purring. Minnow felt her breathing slow and knew the little she-kit was falling asleep. Minnow dipped down slowly and Jay wordlessly took Rose by the scruff, carrying her away to be with her mother. Smokey looked still and peaceful as she slept on the sun-warmed grass, tail twitching every few moments. Beyond her, Apollo lay sprawled out on his back, feet curled in the air like a kit. Minnow shook her head, amused. Oliver had gone to the Twoleg den shortly before sunhigh, and Minnow assumed he'd be back outside around sunset, like normal.

Because of the kit attack, Minnow was now wide awake, and she stretched, allowing her muscles to awaken. The warmth of newleaf felt like pure bliss on her pelt, and the pale gray speckles seemed to shine on her gray fur. "I think I'll go hunt," Minnow announced to Jay, who was struggling to get Storm to settle down with his sister.

"Bring me a bird!" Storm called excitedly to her, only to be silenced by a flick of his father's tail across his mouth. Jay nodded in acknowledgment to Minnow.

Minnow fought back laughter as she turned and headed away. For a moment, she thought about going to the pond, then decided against

it. She still felt a little shame that she had foolishly admitted her past affiliation with RiverClan to Apollo. He hadn't betrayed her secret to the others, and she was grateful for it. It was nice to know that he respected her boundaries, as well as her intent to leave the past in the past. She was glad to call him a friend; not a close one, but a friend nonetheless. But she had grown used to forest prey during leaf-bare, and if Storm wanted a bird, she would try and catch one.

The sun briefly dipped behind a cloud and Minnow paused at the edge of the forest to look at the sky. There were more clouds in the distance, promising rain, so Minnow was glad that they were all taking advantage of the warm, sunny weather while it lasted. She took the first few pawsteps into the forest, intent on catching a blackbird or a thrush. So far, her attempts to catch birds were unsuccessful; they were as quick as fish, but they could fly easily out of her reach, and she hadn't quite gotten the hang of jumping to grab them. Apollo was by far the best bird-hunter of the group, leaping so high to catch them that Minnow wondered if someday he would grow wings himself.

Minnow stalked through the undergrowth, which had grown thicker since leaf-bare ended. She could hear the chittering of prey but shrugged and ignored the sounds of mice and voles. Since there was currently no shortage of prey, she could happily focus on catching whatever she wanted. Ahead, she spotted a sparrow pecking at seeds on the ground and tensed her shoulders, creeping slowly forward until she was within distance of it. Leaning back on her haunches, Minnow leaped, but her movements weren't powerful enough and the sparrow had flown above her head when she was still a tail-length away. Landing clumsily on the forest floor, Minnow cursed.

Minnow carried on, trying not to be bothered by missing her catch. She followed bird-scents deeper into the forest, mostly unaware of how far she had gone. She was glad when she heard the twittering of a blackbird ahead, casting her gaze around until her eyes settled on it, perching on the low branch of a birch tree by a small stream. Noiselessly, she put one paw in front of the other, raising her tail so it didn't brush the ground, eyes fixed on the blackbird. A small glint

of movement just beyond the stream caught Minnow's attention, however, and her eyes left the blackbird just long enough for it to fly away.

There was more movement on the other side of the stream, and to Minnow's horror she saw a heart-breakingly familiar pale ginger pelt between the trunks of two birch trees. Her heart thundered in her chest; she had come too far into the forest! Her breath nearly stopped as she ducked behind a bush, panic settling into her mind. She couldn't risk being seen, but she had to find a way back towards the Twoleg farm without being spotted.

Minnow began backing away slowly, trying to stay behind the cover of the thinning undergrowth, her breaths coming in short gasps as fear took hold on her heart. One step backwards, then another, and another. Then a twig cracked under paw, sounding louder than a forest full of battle warriors, and ahead, Sorrelstream's head whipped up in Minnow's direction. Her eyes flared with shock and alarm. "Minnowpaw?" she breathed.

Minnow's heart dropped, and faster than lightning she turned tail and raced away into the trees. There was hardly a thought in her head other than that she had to get away. But she heard pawsteps thundering behind her, and she knew Sorrelstream was racing after her. "Minnowpaw, wait!" the RiverClan warrior called out.

Go away! Minnow screamed silently, pushing herself harder. *Please, just stop following me!* Why had she been so close to the edge of RiverClan territory? Why was Sorrelstream alone at the back border? Minnow's paws pounded on the forest floor as she neared the edge of the trees, bounding over branches and stones, dodging bushes and sending prey scattering. If she could just get away, maybe Sorrelstream would eventually give up. But Minnow knew Sorrelstream better than that, and knew how persistent she could be. Heart beating loudly, Minnow burst from the trees and bolted down the slope towards the barn. She could see her companions stirring at the sudden commotion, rising to their paws with their fur fluffed in alarm. And still Sorrelstream followed.

Minnow screeched to a halt in front of the other barn cats, whose eyes were as wide as the full moon, brows furrowed. She heard

Sorrelstream slow to a stop behind her, breath coming in ragged gasps. "Why did you run?" she panted.

Minnow didn't turn around to face her. So many emotions were rising in her at once; anger, fear, shame. Everything she had worked to build was crumbling; her new life, the invisible wall that separated this life from the old one, the barriers that shielded her heart from breaking. "Just go home!" she growled, still not turning. Maybe she could still convince Sorrelstream to leave.

Smokey had stepped forward, distress and concern in her eyes as she approached Minnow. "Minnow, what's going on?" she asked.

Minnow could practically feel Sorrelstream tense behind her, and the waves of confusion that rolled off her pelt. "Minnow...?" Her voice was laced with uncertainty.

With Sorrelstream behind her, and Jay, Smokey, and Apollo in front of her, Minnow felt surrounded and helpless. She was scared; all the running and hiding in the world didn't matter now. She couldn't run or hide anymore, not as her two worlds clashed into one. She turned slowly, head down, tail lashing behind her, and finally mustered the courage to look Sorrelstream in the eyes. "Go home," she said again, silently pleading.

Sorrelstream straightened her shoulders. "I'm not going anywhere!" she said indignantly. "Not until you tell me what's going on!"

Defeat settled in, and Minnow's shoulders sagged. Weary and frustrated, she realized all she could do now was explain herself. It was the last thing she wanted, but it was the only thing. "What do you want?" she asked finally, resigned.

Sorrelstream's eyes flared, and Minnow saw a glint of anger in them. "Everything!" she exclaimed, sounding exasperated. "What happened? Why are you out here? Why did you run from me?"

Shuffling pawsteps sounded behind Minnow. "I think you two need some time alone," Jay murmured. Minnow turned her head to watch her friends retreat towards the Twoleg garden, leaving Minnow and Sorrelstream standing at the entrance to the barn.

Minnow sighed. "Fine." She headed into the barn, not needing to check if Sorrelstream was following. She stopped next to her nest, her brain reeling. How was she supposed to tell Sorrelstream what she wanted to know? *What* could she tell her? Taking a deep breath, Minnow faced her old friend, trying to prepare herself for the conversation ahead.

Chapter 13

Minnow was silent for several long moments, and Sorrelstream just stared at her. Bewilderment still shone in her green eyes as she looked Minnow up and down. "You look so different now," she murmured, as if she still couldn't believe who she was looking at.

Minnow bit back a growl. She didn't need to be told how much she had changed, not knowing how different she *felt* since her life had been uprooted. "What do you want me to tell you?" she asked plainly, still hoping foolishly that Sorrelstream might give up and leave.

Sorrelstream sat cautiously, looking at the barn interior around her. She seemed frightened at the giant barn monster that was sleeping there, something Minnow had grown so accustomed to that she forgot about it. "Why are you here? At this place?" she breathed. She turned her gaze back to Minnow's. "Why didn't you come back to RiverClan? Didn't you go to the Moonstone to talk with StarClan?"

Minnow's throat closed up as Sorrelstream's questions brought back the memories she had been suppressing. There was no way to avoid telling the truth now, and Sorrelstream would see right through any lie she might be able to make up. She knew Minnow too well. Taking a deep breath, Minnow replied, "I did."

When Minnow didn't elaborate, Sorrelstream flicked her tail. Minnow went on. "I spoke with StarClan. And it's something I'll be happy to never do again!" She spat the last words, unable to keep the contempt she felt for her warrior ancestors from rising.

"Why?" Sorrelstream asked, pawing the floor of the barn. "Didn't they tell you what was going on? There haven't been any accidents since you left."

Minnow scoffed. "*Because* I left!"

"What do you mean?" Sorrelstream's eyes looked helpless.

Minnow's ears flattened. "Nightwhisper was right!" she spat. "I'm cursed, and StarClan's solution was to cast me out of the forest!"

Sorrelstream's eyes widened more than they already were. "They *made* you leave?" She sounded as if such a thing was impossible to imagine.

Minnow shook her head. "They told me I should," she said. "If I stayed, cats would have kept dying, one by one, until RiverClan was no more." She remembered the words the StarClan warrior Hawkshade had said to her, and recited them; "*Death follows you like a shadow, but because it could not take you, it has taken those closest to you. RiverClan has no future while you are with them.*"

An ominous silence fell over the two cats as Minnow's words sank in. Sorrelstream's mouth was slightly agape, her face clouded with horror. "I don't believe it," she whispered. "I never believed it, not once, but it was true?"

Minnow nodded firmly, her pelt itching with worry and anticipation. "It was true, and I'm not sure you're even safe here, now, with me. You'd better go."

Sorrelstream hesitated. "Don't you want to hear all the news from RiverClan?" She sounded hurt.

Minnow hesitated. She did, but she didn't. Of course part of her was dying to hear how her old Clanmates and her family were doing, and how well the Clan was running. But at the same time she would rather shut it all out so that she could continue to not think about it. Was it selfish of her to wish that her former life would just disappear, forgotten like an old dream? She knew it wasn't that simple though, and all the same she had the nagging curiosity of what was going on in her old home. One look at Sorrelstream's face made her cave, and she laid down by her nest, paws placed neatly in front of her. Sorrelstream did the same, then began speaking. Minnow listened to nearly every detail of Clan life since she'd left.

Sorrelstream told her about Cherryheart's kits becoming apprentices, and that she was now Reedpaw's mentor. She talked about the windstorm and the fallen tree that had claimed the life of Maplenose, about Nettlestep's kitting and more recently, Pebblenose's. Minnow listened to her speak about Tanglestar's death, and Berrystar's succession of him, of her siblings' apprenticeship, and of the harsh greencough that took Blacktail and, to Minnow's shock and sadness, Ashstar.

"Ashstar is dead?" Minnow breathed as Sorrelstream finished. Grief flooded her; Ashstar had tried, really tried, to help her as her curse plagued RiverClan. He was the only leader she had ever known, and she had such great respect for him.

Sorrelstream was nodding sadly. "Birchstar is an excellent leader," she went on. Gingerly, she added, "He made Tawnyclaw his deputy."

Minnow was overcome with emotion at that news; maybe she hadn't failed Tawnyclaw after all. It seemed that, after all she had put him through, he was still as worthy and important to RiverClan as she remembered him to be. "That's good," she replied, unable to keep the fondness from her voice. Oh, how she missed Tawnyclaw!

Sorrelstream sighed. "I think that's everything." She looked as if she was waiting for Minnow to say something.

Minnow stood. "Then it's probably time for you to go," she said. Another wave of hurt washed over Sorrelstream's face, but she stood as well.

"Is that it?" she meowed sadly. "I don't suppose you'll be coming home?"

Minnow shook her head immediately. "I *am* home," she responded, for once feeling no doubts. "I'm happy here, Sorrelstream. My place isn't in RiverClan anymore, it's out here."

Sorrelstream's ears drooped and her eyes dropped to her paws. Her tail hung sadly behind her as the two of them walked back out of the barn. "So this is goodbye, again," she said.

Minnow blinked. "It is."

Once again, Sorrelstream met Minnow's gaze. "Goodbye then. Minnow."

As she turned to walk back towards the forest, Minnow had one final thought. "Sorrelstream?" Her friend turned. "Please don't say a word to anyone."

After a short moment, Sorrelstream's eyes lightened, and she nodded. "I won't," she promised.

"Thank you," Minnow's voice was barely a breath, knowing how easily the rest of RiverClan could find out the truth about her whereabouts. She watched Sorrelstream's pelt disappear in the distance, unable to tell how she was feeling after their conversation. She didn't need to worry that Sorrelstream would keep her mouth shut; she would easily keep that secret for Minnow, and Minnow found herself immensely glad that she'd ever known Sorrelstream's friendship. With that, she wouldn't have to worry about anything. Just as they should, RiverClan would keep on believing that she was dead.

Minnow could feel stares burning into her pelt soon after Sorrelstream left. She turned around to meet the gazes of Jay, Smokey, Apollo, and now Oliver, who was carrying Storm and Rose on his back.

Jay was the first to speak. "So you really were a Clan cat," he observed. "You didn't have to hide that from us, you know." His voice was soft.

Minnow took a deep breath. "Yes, I was a Clan cat," she told them. "I was a RiverClan cat. That's why I know how to swim and hunt for fish."

"You don't have to tell us anything if you don't want to," Smokey cut in, her gaze sympathetic.

Minnow noticed Apollo watching her with a calculating stare, as if he was wondering if she would tell them what she had told him.

Minnow's gaze passed between each of her friends and, knowing how much she had hurt Sorrelstream by hiding her very existence, she knew she didn't want to do the same to them. "No," she said firmly. "You all deserve to know."

The five cats, along with the kits, shuffled into the barn as the sun began to descend over the Twoleg farm. Minnow had dealt with one hard conversation today; she could handle another. As everyone settled into their nests in the barn, and the kits began to nurse, Minnow faced them and began to speak. "I was an apprentice in RiverClan several moons ago. My name was Minnowpaw, and I was training to be a RiverClan warrior."

Minnow spoke slowly so that her companions could comprehend the mass of information being thrown at them. She briefly explained Clan roles and how the Clans interacted to give them some basis for everything else. She talked about her apprenticeship to Tawnyclaw, about her friendship with Sorrelstream, and at last about the accident that changed everything. They seemed horrified as she recalled the day she drowned in the river, and how she sprang back to life after being declared dead.

"I thought it was a miracle from StarClan," she admitted. "We all did. Until bad things started happening." She launched into the story of the battle with ThunderClan to reclaim Sunningrocks, and how she had accidentally leaped into Shadebelly's path, knocking him down. She remembered the sickening crack as his head hit the hard stones, and how his lifeless eyes stared up at the sky. She went on to Breezekit's death, how the little kit collapsed after eating poisoned prey that had been just fine until he took a bite. She remembered that this had been the point most of the Clan had turned on her. Shadebelly's death could have easily been ruled an accident caused by a clumsy apprentice, but two deaths made it a pattern. She shuddered as she remembered the hatred in her Clanmates' eyes.

"That was when Ashstar decided not to give me my warrior ceremony," Minnow recalled sadly. "I was supposed to get my warrior name, to become a real part of my Clan and train apprentices of my own. But it just got worse from there." Lastly, Minnow told the story of the fox, how the hungry creature had

evaded the patrols sent to drive it off, instead infiltrating their camp and attempting to take on a Clan full of warriors. The words poured out of her as she recounted the bloody battle with the fox, how it fought to kill, and how it at last did, as it tore her best friend to pieces.

"StarClan called me to the Moonstone, where Clan leaders and medicine cats go to speak with them," she told her friends, no longer able to look them in the eyes. "I thought they would fix everything, and do something to stop my Clanmates from dying. But they told me I was cursed, and that the only way to protect them was to go somewhere beyond the Clan territories, where StarClan does not walk. That's how I ended up here."

Silence followed her story, as the other cats struggled to comprehend everything she had just told them. Looking at their faces, Minnow saw shock and horror, which she expected, but also sorrow and grief. At the beginning, they had just seemed surprised that cat spirits existed, watching over the four warrior Clans. Now they were engrossed in Minnow's tale of heartache and destruction. Minnow knew it was a lot for them to take in, and she waited patiently for any of them to speak up.

"I can't believe they just cast you out," Oliver whispered. He was the last cat Minnow expected to have an opinion, but then again, she had underestimated him before. "Don't they care about *every* cat they watch over?"

Minnow scoffed. "You'd think," she muttered.

Smokey's ears flicked as if she was realizing something. "That's why you fought the fox like you did. You weren't just protecting us; you were reliving the attack."

Minnow's heart felt heavy. "Yes," she replied. "I couldn't bear to let it happen again, not if I could do anything about it. I lost Flamepelt." While she didn't say it out loud, Minnow could tell that every cat there knew how she'd felt about Flamepelt just from saying his name.

By now, Minnow was tired and sad and angry. *So much has changed*

today, she thought wearily. She knew that if she laid down in her nest, sleep would not come to her. And as much as she knew her friends probably had endless questions, she didn't want to answer any of them. She was too overwhelmed. Wordlessly, she hauled herself to her paws, heading once more to the roof of the barn for some space to herself.

Chapter 14

Minnow's story had dragged on so long that by the time she had escaped to the barn roof, nighttime had come. The stars above glittered brilliantly, and the moon was bright and nearly full overhead. She stared across the Twoleg garden, into the forest where they hunted and beyond, where the four Clans were carrying on their lives as usual. So much had changed today, she knew, and she wasn't sure how she had been able to face it. Somehow she knew that the internal battle she'd been fighting was far worse than any border skirmish she could ever fight. It was astounding to her to think that she would rather be locked in a teeth-and-claws tussle than what she'd just gone through. But then again, she thought, she should probably feel proud of herself for being able to go through something so enormously difficult. As she peered down from the top of the barn, she straightened her shoulders.

Minnow suddenly felt delayed guilt clawing at her heart; did her friends resent her for lying to them? Had she lost their trust by hiding who she was from them for all these moons? Until now, she hadn't stopped to think about that. She had just opened her mouth and let the words come spilling out like a flooded river after newleaf. It had been so easy to just say everything, easier than it should have been, and also a little relieving. Would it be easier to live with now that everyone knew? Or would they all cease to trust her knowing that not only had she lied, but cats had died as a result of her curse?

It wasn't your fault, she tried hard to remind herself. It was such an extreme effort to put distance between herself and her curse. The curse had killed her Clanmates, not her own claws. Even StarClan knew it, although their opinion meant very little to Minnow these days. She tried hard to remember that she was *not* a murderer, but it was difficult.

Minnow's mind drifted once more to Sorrelstream. It cut her deep to think of how easily she had dismissed the cat she'd once called a

friend. *It was for her own good,* she tried to reason with herself. But she'd seen the hurt in Sorrelstream's eyes, and it was painful to remember. Part of her missed the lively she-cat she had shared a den with as apprentices, but she could tell by their brief interaction that Sorrelstream had changed. Just like Minnow, she was older, grown, wiser and more mature. She was a warrior, something Minnow couldn't be. Maybe there was a gap between them now that couldn't be overcome. Minnow wasn't sure how to feel about that.

She was terrified to think that Sorrelstream might tell RiverClan everything that had happened today, even though she knew it would never happen. But if she did, Minnow wondered, what would they think? Would they try to find her? Or would they have forgiven her, and offer an invitation to return to the Clan? Selfishly, Minnow let her thoughts wander as she pictured returning to the reeds and ferns of RiverClan territory, to hear the river bubbling again, to weave between the birch trees and sniff for water voles in the lush undergrowth. If she closed her eyes, she could almost feel it, and thought that if she reached out a paw, she would find herself touching the river.

But instead, her eyes opened to face the empty Twoleg farm below. One light shone from the inside of the Twoleg nest, and she watched Oliver's silhouette as the kittypet returned home from the barn for the night. The gently rippling surface of the pond on the other side reflected the silvery moonlight, and the tall grass beyond the Twoleg fence danced gently in the night breeze. This was not the forest, and though it had come to feel like home, Minnow's heart was tearing in two as she thought of her past life and this one.

Gentle pawsteps sounded from the hole in the barn roof, and Minnow didn't need to turn around to see who it was. She continued watching the ground below as Apollo sat a tail-length away from her, looking out as well. Several long moments passed in silence, and Minnow wondered if he would say anything. But she knew he wouldn't; that's the kind of cat he was, and she had to respect him for that. He liked to tease her, and others, when there were no real stakes, but when something was serious, he was more considerate than Minnow thought he ever could be when she'd first

met him. It made her trust him.

After a while, Minnow decided to speak, without turning to face Apollo. "I thought I'd managed to leave it all behind. But it followed me out here." She still couldn't believe Sorrelstream had found her, and desperately wished it hadn't happened.

In the corner of her vision, she saw Apollo nodding slowly. He didn't speak a word, though, and in the silence Minnow felt a tug of guilt, and she whispered, "Maybe I was right to want to leave."

Gently, Apollo closed the gap between them and wrapped his tail comfortingly around Minnow. She felt so vulnerable, suddenly sharing her deepest thoughts and sorrows. She didn't think it would make her feel any better. "I understand now," Apollo meowed. "If you still want to leave, we won't try to stop you. You deserve to be in a place where you're happy."

Sorrow rising within her, Minnow at last met Apollo's gaze. "I *am* happy here," she said, nearly sobbing. She had told Sorrelstream that, and it was the truth, but it hurt as well. "Today was just a cruel reminder of how close I am to my past. I tried so hard to outrun it, to escape it, but the forest is right there." She flicked her eyes towards it. "Everything I've ever known is just on the other side. Maybe it'll haunt me forever."

Apollo shifted on his paws, looking away. "We all have a past," he murmured, a strange look passing over his face. For the first time, Minnow wondered what *his* past was. "It's not something we can ever outrun, you know. It's part of us, but it doesn't have to define us." He looked back at Minnow. "I don't know who you were before, but I know who you are now, and I know that you've changed since you lived in RiverClan. Your future is yours to decide, not RiverClan's, not StarClan's."

Minnow looked away this time. "Everything I've ever been taught is that each pawstep, and my entire purpose, is guided by StarClan. It seems selfish to do anything else."

Apollo flicked his ears. "It's not selfish to want something for yourself," he reasoned. "What's the point of having your own life if

it isn't yours to live?" His words struck something in Minnow, and she purred gratefully.

"Thank you," she told him.

He purred back, and a familiar glint of mischief returned to his amber eyes. "If you leave," he meowed, "try not to miss me too much, okay?" His whiskers twitched in amusement.

Minnow nudged his flank, glad for his humor to ease her heavy thoughts. "I'm not going anywhere," she said gently. She thought of what she had here; friends, a warm place to sleep, plenty of prey. She had the pond, so she always had water. There were Storm and Rose, who she grew more fond of with each passing day. If she hadn't been able to leave the night she'd planned to, there was no way she could do it now. She hadn't even thought of it, and even now the idea didn't appeal to her in the slightest. Playfully, she batted Apollo with a paw. "You're stuck with me."

He purred. "I was afraid of that."

Chapter 15

Minnow and Apollo stayed on the barn roof in silence until after the moon had passed its highest point in the sky, and Minnow was so overcome with weariness that she practically collapsed into her nest. Sleep came quickly, and surprisingly pleasant dreams flashed behind her closed eyelids. She dreamed that she was swimming in the pond, and behind her paddled Apollo, Jay, and Smokey. The sunlight on the water shone like the Moonstone, and there was such a comfortable warmth that settled over her, warming her through to her bones. It felt like bliss. As Minnow waded gracefully through the water, she heard excited voices behind her and turned to see Storm and Rose, nearly half-grown, leaping one after the other into the pond, splashing water all over the other cats. They, too, were swimming, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to them.

Minnow peered down into the water. Her moving paws scared away all the fish near her, but the water was clear enough that she could see some still swimming near the bank. Maybe she could finally convince the other cats to try eating one. Smoothly, she steered herself over to the fish, keeping her shadow behind her, and eyed one of them. Taking a deep breath, she plunged her head beneath the surface, gripping the slippery body in her jaws before gliding back up to the surface. Silence greeted her.

Minnow twisted her head around. Everyone was gone now, and she couldn't hear their voices. Where had they gone? Confused and worried, she paddled to the edge of the pond and hauled herself out, silver pelt dripping wet and heavy. She dropped the fish. "Jay? Smokey?" she called. "Apollo? Storm? Rose?" No answers followed. Minnow padded apprehensively up the slope that dipped down towards the pond, and to her horror, the barn was nowhere in sight. The Twoleg garden and nest, the Twoleg bird nest, the fence, and the forest were nowhere in sight. Instead she was staring across a vast empty moor. No breeze ruffled the grass, and no clouds flitted across the sky. Turning frantically, Minnow saw that the pond was now gone too, and there were just endless fields surrounding her.

She was completely, utterly alone. Panic began to settle in, as the emptiness around her crept into her heart. There was nothing, and no one, around her. All she knew was that she was alone, and it scared her.

Gasping, Minnow rose from her nest. Her heart thundered inside of her and her nest was scattered around her. She laid her head down on the mess of hay. Her dream had shaken her, and she needed a moment to recover from it. She thought she had been alone before, but nothing compared to how that dream had felt. She could tell that the other cats had already woken, and she could hear them speaking softly at the barn entrance. Outside, Storm and Rose were playing in the grass, their happy voices filling the air. Minnow could hear wind in the trees, the squawking of Twoleg birds, and the gentle creaking of the barn. Every sound, every noise, helped ground her. The voices of her friends and the kits were the sweetest sounds she'd ever heard. *It was just a dream,* she said to herself as her breathing settled. *I'm not alone.*

After a while, Minnow opened her eyes and stood, stretching from whiskers to tail-tip. She felt much better, and shook her head in slight amusement as she pawed the messy hay of her nest back into a pile. She could feel a warm breeze beckoning her outside, and she walked away from the nests towards Jay's voice.

She found Jay and Smokey outside the barn, talking to each other as they watched the kits wrestle a few tail-lengths away. They were doing what looked like very clumsy versions of the battle moves Minnow had been teaching the others, and she was surprised to see it. "Where did they learn that?" she asked, her voice causing Jay and Smokey to jump.

Smokey purred. "Probably from them." She flicked her tail in the opposite direction, and Minnow turned to see, much to her shock, Apollo and Oliver practice-fighting.

She widened her eyes. "Wow," was all she could say. She watched the two for a few moments; Apollo was smooth and graceful, quick and confident with his movements. He ran a small circle around Oliver to confuse him before landing several blows on Oliver's head with a forepaw. Oliver jumped to attack but Apollo lunged

backwards, then leaned back on his hind legs and used the momentum to launch forward, knocking Oliver to the ground. The orange kittypet was surprisingly quick and, as Apollo pinned his shoulders down, he kicked up with his hind legs and dislodged his attacker. The two leaped around each other a couple times before Oliver dived forward, aiming for Apollo's legs, and sent the black tom buckling downwards. As he fell, Oliver grabbed Apollo's pelt with his large paws and pressed his muzzle into the ground, tail lashing triumphantly.

Minnow was speechless. She'd known that Oliver had watched a few of their training sessions, but had never imagined he'd want to try fighting himself. And even more, he had won against Apollo! Once again, Minnow was a little ashamed that she had stereotyped and underestimated the kittypet.

The two cats ended their fight and joined everyone else, panting and purring. "Nice going!" Jay praised Oliver, whose green eyes shone.

Oliver smacked Apollo with his tail. "Not bad for a *kittypet,* huh?" he teased. Apollo's ears flicked, and amusement glittered in his eyes.

"That was really good," Minnow put in. Her dream was long forgotten now, the horrifying loneliness nothing but a whisper of her imagination as she surrounded herself with the cats she shared her home with. "Now all you need to do is hunt and you can be a barn cat, too," she joked.

Oliver's whiskers twitched and he sat, licking a forepaw. "I caught a mouse once," he meowed. "My housefolk weren't too happy."

Apollo sat down next to Minnow and began to groom his messy fur. With Jay and Smokey on her other side, they formed a circle. Noticing that they were being left out, Storm and Rose bounded over and thrust their way in between the other cats. "We want to catch a mouse, too!" Rose exclaimed. Storm climbed up onto Jay's shoulders, as was his favorite thing to do. His father winced as the kit's claws came within a whisker's width of his eye.

"We can catch you a mouse in the barn," Smokey told her daughter.

"We want to catch one in the *forest*!" Rose corrected herself, eyes gleaming with excitement.

Minnow couldn't help but purr. The kits were so adventurous, so it was only a matter of time before they'd want to explore beyond the Twoleg garden. It was hard to believe they were already three moons old.

Smokey leaned forward and licked the top of Rose's tortoiseshell head. "Okay, my love, I'll go catch you a forest mouse," she purred, an amused gleam in her eye that only the grown cats could detect. She looked up at Minnow. "Care to join me?"

Minnow couldn't help but think that Smokey had some ulterior motive for inviting her on a hunt, but she didn't mind. Smokey was perhaps the most gentle and relaxed cat she had ever met, except for maybe Silverheart. Minnow was comfortable talking to her, and she knew that Smokey would never demand more than Minnow was willing to give. She actually reminded Minnow of Ashflower.

Minnow followed Smokey as the tabby queen strolled away and towards the forest. Even from a short distance, the trees and undergrowth looked thick and lush. Newleaf was almost over, and the bright, warm sun overhead nearly illuminated the grass in the two she-cats' path. Minnow's pelt cooled immediately as they stepped into the shade of the forest, and her nose was filled with rich prey-scent. She heard Smokey sigh contentedly. Not long after, Minnow felt Smokey's gaze fixed on her pelt, and she turned to face her.

Smokey's blue eyes were soft. "I know yesterday was a lot for you," she began. "If there's anything you need to talk about, I'm here for you."

Minnow knew this was coming. "I'm fine," she mewed. "I mean, the last thing I expected was for some cat to find me out here, but I guess I'm glad it was Sorrelstream."

Smokey nodded slowly. "She was your friend?"

"My best friend." Minnow's heart warmed a little. "Except for Flamepelt, but that was... different."

Smokey blinked. "You loved him," she said plainly. "I'm sorry that you had to watch him die. I'm sorry you had to watch *any* of them die."

Minnow shrugged. "Death is a part of life," she meowed. "I came to terms with their deaths a while ago, but it was hard to move on from Flamepelt," she admitted. She met Smokey's gaze. "I know you probably think I'm struggling with all of this, but I'm more fine than I thought I would be. Maybe everything coming to light was exactly what I needed."

Smokey purred. "I think that's a good thing," she said. She was silent for a few moments, then she said, "I know what it's like to lose everything, too."

Minnow looked at her, but she was staring off into the trees. "What do you mean?" she asked.

Smokey sighed sadly. "I haven't been a loner my whole life," she mewed, then began walking again. Minnow followed. "I was a kittypet long before I met Jay. I had a comfortable nest and the most amazing housefolk. They had a kit of their own, and I loved her."

Minnow saw emotion clouding her friend's gaze, and it echoed in her own heart. "What happened?" she asked softly. If Smokey had been so happy as a kittypet, why did she give that up?

"There was a fire," Smokey replied, sounding sad. "My housefolk's nest went up in flames, and they were all lucky enough to get out. I don't think they forgot about me, but nonetheless I was trapped inside." Darkness clouded her vision as she recalled the memory. "I was able to get out the back of the nest, and I was so frightened that I just ran and ran until my legs couldn't carry me any farther.

"I was so tired, and my lungs hurt from the smoke, and I had

burns and scratches all over me. I had no idea where I was, and it was nighttime. I remember collapsing under a bush and waking up in the morning. I wandered for an entire moon, but I could never find my way back to my nest and my housefolk. I was injured, too, so I was getting weaker by the day." She paused, then stopped walking. "That's when I met Jay. He'd lived his whole life as a loner, and he knew a little about herbs from his mother. He nursed me back to health, and in that time we fell in love. I knew that my old life was gone forever, but I had a new one to look forward to."

As Smokey finished her story, Minnow felt a pang of sadness for her. In the entire time she had known the barn cats, she had never heard their stories, and instead she'd been too focused on her own suffering. "I'm so sorry," she breathed. Smokey's story was so much like her own; she'd lost her home, her family, and her entire life just as quickly as Minnow had.

A little light returned to Smokey's eyes. "I lost everything I had, but that didn't mean my life was over. Meeting Jay was the best thing that ever happened to me, and until then I didn't know if I would ever be happy again." Her ears twitched. "But it's possible, Minnow. And I hope you know that."

Minnow couldn't fight back the purr that rose in her throat. "I'm learning that every day," she meowed.

A loud crack of thunder made both cats nearly jump out of their skin, and their heads snapped up towards the sky. While they had been in the forest, the clouds that had been moving in since yesterday had crowded the sky, and the rain they promised was quickly approaching. The forest darkened and rain-scent filled the air. "We should probably catch Rose's mouse," Smokey said, whiskers twitching in amusement. "I'd rather not get stuck out in the rain."

Chapter 16

The final days of newleaf were warm, and after several days of rain, a thick humidity settled in the air. Minnow and the barn cats continued their battle training, practicing from early morning to well past sunhigh nearly every day. It was tiring, but the moons Minnow had spent doing nothing had weakened her, and she was grateful to be using her muscles again. She knew she was growing stronger all the time; she could feel it. They had all become lean and strong with time, and Minnow was so proud of them all.

Minnow squared her shoulders as she faced Jay. A few fox-lengths away, Apollo and Smokey were locked in a tussle as Rose and Storm cheered their mother on. A cool breeze blew across the Twoleg garden and ruffled Minnow's fur, and it was a welcome reprieve from the heat of the impending greenleaf. Jay's eyes were narrowed in concentration as he sized up his opponent, and Minnow saw muscles ripple beneath his dark pelt as he prepared to leap. He launched off the ground and flew at Minnow. Instead of dodging, she jumped forward to meet him, grasping his shoulders with her front paws as his hind paws met her exposed belly. The two fell, rolling on the grass, and Minnow kicked at his flanks and softly closed her teeth on his shoulder. Jay held on to her body and flipped over, throwing her down hard, before jumping for her again. Minnow kicked out with her feet and managed to strike his chest, and she heard his breath leave him. Taking advantage of the fact that Jay was winded, Minnow rose quickly and jumped over him, landing on top of him with all her weight, squashing him to the ground. He grabbed her hind leg in his teeth and pulled her off, taking her by surprise. She thought she'd had him, but before she knew it she was on her back with Jay's teeth around her throat.

Great StarClan, he's good, Minnow thought to herself as Jay let her up. "Great job!" She congratulated him, unable to keep the surprise out of her voice. Jay had proven to be a cat that never gave up, so just when Minnow thought she had won, he was just getting started.

"A fox wouldn't stand a chance against me," he boasted playfully, puffing out his chest. Minnow purred with amusement, shaking out her ruffled pelt. Jay's eyes wandered to where his mate was still fighting with Apollo, and the two of them strode over to watch. They stood next to Oliver, who seemed to be enjoying the warm sun while watching the battling cats. Rose and Storm seemed to have grown bored of watching, and were now play-fighting themselves.

As Jay and Minnow settled, Apollo shoved Smokey forward and she stumbled, falling backwards. Recovering quickly, she leaned back into her fall as Apollo leaped over her, prepared for his attack. As his paws met her shoulders, hers came in contact with his chest, shoving him in return. His eyes widened, clearly not expecting it, and he too tumbled backwards. Smokey moved with him, pinning him to the ground with her paws on his neck. His tail flicked once, announcing his surrender.

"Nice going!" Jay called to Smokey as the two cats wandered over to meet them.

"I didn't think a cat could move that fast," Oliver purred.

"You should see how fast a cat can move in water!" Apollo exclaimed, eyes shining with his normal mischievousness.

Minnow cocked her head, eyeing him. "Have you been swimming?" She asked. He hadn't liked it very much the time he tried with Minnow, but he had put forth a great deal of effort.

Apollo purred. "I can't let you be better than me at everything!"

Minnow let out a *mrrow* of laughter at his attitude. So far, Apollo had only beaten her in battle practice the one time.

"Now *this* I have to see!" Jay exclaimed. Shrugging nonchalantly, Apollo turned and began walking towards the pond, and the rest of the cats followed. Minnow was still a little surprised that he had been swimming, but not in a bad way. She had come to terms with how much her life in RiverClan was influencing her life now, and her talk with Smokey had helped greatly. She supposed if she was going to stay true to herself, that meant not giving up her RiverClan

nature, even if Clan life had slipped through her claws.

Without even pausing on the bank, Apollo slipped into the water and immediately began paddling around, far more smoothly than he had the first time. Minnow's eyes widened in surprise. "Wow," she meowed. Apollo swam in a few tight circles, clearly showing off now, and Minnow rolled her eyes, whiskers twitching. "Pretty soon you'll be a fish," she joked.

Apollo eyed her playfully. "If I'm a fish, are you gonna come catch me?" he challenged.

"How hard is it to even catch a fish?" Smokey asked, interrupting.

Jay nodded. "It seems like it'd be tricky," he agreed.

Feeling mischief rising within her, Minnow said, "It's about this easy," and launched into the pond. Apollo's amber eyes widened as she dove onto him, and water splashed everywhere as she grabbed his sodden pelt in her paws and dragged him down. The two of them grappled in the water for a few moments before Apollo scurried to the edge of the pond and hauled himself out. Jay, Smokey, and Oliver were watching in amusement, while Storm and Rose were rolling on the ground in laughter. Minnow exited the water after Apollo.

"I can't imagine swimming," Smokey said after the laughter died down. "Isn't the water uncomfortable?"

Minnow shook her head. "I'm used to it," she told them. "In RiverClan, we ate fish all the time, so our pelts were always sleek and equipped for swimming. It really comes naturally to us, but it's not that hard to learn." She raised an eyebrow. "Want to try it?"

Smokey took a small step back, looking apprehensive. Her brow furrowed. "I don't know," she mumbled. But then she looked past Minnow again at the pond, and after a couple moments she said, "You know what? Why not?"

Minnow's heart swelled. She loved that these cats trusted her, and that they were willing to try new things. She liked that they could

all do these things together. Smokey approached the water and hesitated a moment more before stepping in. She gasped a little at the chill of the water, but soon she was standing belly-deep in the water. "Oh," she said, sounding surprised. "This doesn't feel that bad. How do you swim?"

Minnow went back into the pond and stood next to Smokey, then began walking her through the same steps she had with Apollo. Before she knew it, Smokey was swimming in small strides at the edge of the pond. Looking pleased with herself, she got out. Jay had been watching with intense curiosity. "If everyone else is doing this, I guess I will too," he meowed. It took him just a little bit longer to get the hang of it, but soon he too was paddling. Minnow purred.

"Well, you won't get me in the water," Oliver mused, stretching. "My housefolk would have a fit."

"Can we try?" Storm asked excitedly as he and his sister stood by the water.

"Please?" Rose added.

Smokey immediately shook her head. "You're too little," she told them. They looked crestfallen, so she added, "Someday you can."

The two kits weren't upset for long, as they got distracted by the fish in the pond. Their eyes were wide as they followed the fish back and forth. "Those are cool!" Rose breathed.

"Those are fish," Minnow said to the two kits. "They're delicious, too."

Storm looked up at her. "You *eat* them?"

Minnow nodded and purred. "Want to try one?"

Storm immediately nodded, and Rose followed suit. Minnow got back into the water and located a large fish, nearing it. The water was deep enough that she had to dive for it, so she sucked in a breath and went under, catching the fish with ease. She returned to the grass and shook out her pelt, dropping the fish in front of the kits. They looked a little scared of it, so Minnow said, "Here," and

leaned forward to take a bite. Seeing that it was okay, the two kits each took a tiny bite and chewed.

Rose scrunched up her nose. "It's weird," she said. "But kinda good."

"It's not like mouse," Storm agreed, swallowing his mouthful. "But I think I like it."

Minnow turned to her friends. "Come on, guys!" she said.

The four cats padded forward, each with varying degrees of uncertainty in their gazes. One by one, they took a bite of the fish, ending with Oliver. Apollo nodded as he chewed, and Jay and Smokey both looked pleasantly surprised by the taste.

"It's rich," Jay observed.

"The fish in the river are even richer," Minnow replied.

Oliver licked his lips. "My housefolk give me something that tastes a little like this."

Minnow was glad that they all liked the fish, and she loved seeing them all together like this. The kits wanted some more, and Apollo decided it was his turn to try. Before long, the four barn cats were all in the pond trying to catch fish, and they stayed out until the sun began to set. They ate fish by the pond under the brilliant orange sky, basking in the last rays of sunlight. With full bellies, the kits soon fell asleep. Storm was curled up on Minnow's side, and Rose was sprawled out on top of Smokey. They ate and shared tongues, and Minnow's heart was full.

My own little Clan.

Chapter 17

The days continued to pass, each one growing warmer and warmer as newleaf fell away and greenleaf took hold. Between hunting, swimming, battle practice, playing with the kits, and doing things with the other barn cats, Minnow didn't have time to wallow in the grief that she had held onto for so long. She no longer felt the sadness or the anger that she had nearly lost herself to. Her new life was just about perfect, and she knew that this was where she was meant to be. It was refreshing to watch Storm and Rose get into the usual kit trouble, and she enjoyed the little hunting patrols she and the other cats occasionally went on in the forest. Though the days became too hot to bask in the sun, the nights were just warm enough to lay under the moonlight in the Twoleg garden. This was the most peace Minnow had felt in moons, and she was happy for it.

Pale dawn sunlight streamed in through the entrance to the barn, softly illuminating the paw-trodden floor. Minnow rose early from her nest and stretched, parting her jaws in a wide yawn. She could see the other cats still asleep in their nests, and Storm was snoring as he lay on his back, right on top of Rose, whose paws were twitching while she dreamed. Minnow tiptoed past them and sat just outside the barn, closing her eyes and allowing the warm morning breeze to ruffle her whiskers. Wispy clouds that looked like torn tufts of white fur moved lazily in the sky, but in the distance Minnow could see thicker, darker clouds. She knew that more rain would come, likely within the next quarter moon. The sun rose higher and the Twoleg garden grew lighter, and she heard the rustling of hay behind her as another cat woke.

Soft pawsteps padded closer and Jay sat next to Minnow, sighing contentedly. "It's going to be a beautiful day," he remarked.

Minnow nodded in reply, then looked towards the forest. It had been calling to her lately, and every time they hunted there, she felt the urge to go farther, to where the oak trees fell away into birch, where the grass became lush ferns and water voles scurried in the

tangled roots of willow trees. She wanted to hear the river, and the way the reeds mimicked it when the wind blew through them. She felt Jay watching her as she stared into the distance. "I'm going to go hunting," she told him.

His ears flicked. "Need any company?" he asked.

"No, thank you," Minnow replied, meeting his gaze. "I think I'll go alone."

Jay watched her for another moment before dipping his head to her. Minnow knew what he was thinking, but he wasn't going to say it. "Have fun," he told her as she padded away.

Minnow took her time climbing the hill that led to the forest. The sun was all the way up now and there was a delightful chattering of birds ahead of her. She supposed she'd never be able to catch them like Apollo could, but that was okay. She much preferred the taste of fish and water voles, and thinking of the small furry creatures had made her hungry for one.

Once under the cover of the trees, Minnow headed in the direction of a grove of willow trees, intently sniffing the air for prey. Squirrel-scent was everywhere, and the annoying little animals were clambering through the branches above her head, chittering and searching for food. She pressed on, delighted that she soon picked up the scent of water vole. She passed a large willow tree, twisted and gnarled with age, the new growths of leafy tendrils hanging low from its branches. Stepping into a small clearing, Minnow pressed her body against the ground, seeing small movements flickering in the lush grass ahead. She crept closer, her paws barely grazing the ground, until she was close enough, and leapt. The water vole didn't even have time to register the attack before Minnow gave it a swift bite to the neck.

Out of habit, Minnow silently thanked StarClan for the life of the water vole, but even though she hadn't said it out loud, the words felt bitter on her tongue. She shook her head and turned, making her way out of the forest and back towards the barn. She was caught off guard, however, as she spotted the pelt of Sorrelstream from on top of the slope. Her RiverClan friend was standing outside

the barn, seemingly speaking to Jay, Smokey, Apollo, and Oliver. Minnow cautiously descended the hill and padded up to the group of cats, dropping the water vole on the ground. "Sorrelstream?"

Sorrelstream turned, and Minnow's eyes widened in shock at the sight of Sorrelstream's belly; it was huge and swollen with kits! The smallest pang of jealousy ran through Minnow, quickly replaced by intense curiosity at why Sorrelstream was here.

"Hi, Minnow," the pale ginger she-cat greeted, stepping forward to touch noses with Minnow.

"What are you doing here?" Minnow asked, taking a small step back. She felt the lingering fear that Sorrelstream wasn't safe around her, despite the fact that she was outside Clan territories. She knew it was irrational, but she really cared for Sorrelstream, and the last thing she wanted was for her to get hurt. Especially now, she thought to herself, since she was evidently going to be a mother very soon. "I told you to stay away."

Minnow expected Sorrelstream to look hurt, but then she noticed the troubled look on her face. It seemed like something was wrong.

"She came here while you were hunting," Jay said softly. "We didn't think it would cause any harm for her to talk with you."

Minnow let out a small sigh. It *wouldn't* cause any harm, she knew, and she also knew that she couldn't just turn Sorrelstream away. Their friendship was rooted far deeper than her curse, and StarClan would do well to keep their grubby paws off of her, or however the curse worked. "Let's go into the barn," she said at last.

The two cats made their way out from under the warm sun, and the other cats paused. "We'll go and leave you alone," Smokey meowed behind them.

Minnow turned, seeing their solemn faces. "You don't have to go," she said softly. There was nothing Sorrelstream had to say that they couldn't hear, Minnow thought. They were just as entitled to be there as Minnow was.

The cats all settled into the barn, and Smokey curled around her kits. They must have been playing hard while Minnow hunted because they were already fast asleep again. Jay sat close to his mate, pressing his pelt against hers, while Apollo and Oliver took up spaces nearby. Minnow sat facing Sorrelstream, tucking her paws neatly beneath her. "So what's been going on?" she asked. She still hadn't gotten over her shock at Sorrelstream's pregnancy. "You're expecting kits. With who?"

A glimmer of happiness flashed over Sorrelstream's face, for a moment covering up her clear worry. "Redblaze," she answered.

That was the last name Minnow expected to hear, and she thought about the red-colored tom for the first time in a while. He'd been such an energetic kit, and later an enthusiastic and strong apprentice. He was the first and only cat Flamepelt had ever mentored, and the three of them had done many border and hunting patrols together as Minnow and Flamepelt grew closer. Minnow remembered the hurt of watching Redblaze and his sisters become warriors, not long after it was decided that she wouldn't be receiving her warrior name. In the end, she remembered that Redblaze was one of the very few cats to stand by her side and defend her against their Clanmates.

Then Minnow thought about the last time she had seen Redblaze, his face awash with shock and grief as Flamepelt lay dead before the Clan. In the few heartbeats following the fox's brutal attack, a darkness had fallen over him. She remembered his green eyes twisting into anger and hatred as he turned towards her and called her a murderer.

You killed my mentor!

Minnow was staring into emptiness, her heart aching at the memory. Sorrelstream must have noticed, because her gaze softened and she murmured, "He's forgiven you, you know." After a moment, she added, "Everyone has."

Minnow met Sorrelstream's gaze, a little surprised to hear it. Part of her had been praying to hear those words, all this time wondering how far her former Clanmates' resentment towards her

would go. But if what Sorrelstream was saying was true, then it hadn't gone far at all, whisked away by the changing seasons. "I'm so glad to hear that," was all she could say.

A small purr escaped Sorrelstream. "Won't you come home?" she whispered. "Everyone has moved on, and they've all forgiven you. We all know now that none of it was your fault. So please, Minnow, will you come back to RiverClan?" There was a pain in her eyes, a longing that almost made Minnow want to say yes.

But she couldn't. "I'm sorry, Sorrelstream," she meowed. "I couldn't be happier to hear that, but that doesn't mean the curse is gone. The only way RiverClan will be safe is if I stay outside Clan territories. I may not trust StarClan as much as I once did, but I know they were telling the truth. I'll always be grateful for the friendships I had when I was with RiverClan, especially yours, but I can't risk your lives."

There was a long, sad silence. Sorrelstream was gazing at her paws. "You've given up so much for us," she said at last. "It's not fair!"

Minnow shrugged. "I know," she replied, knowing all too well how unfair it was. "But if living my life as an outcast will keep RiverClan safe, then I'll do it. And you can rest easy knowing that I'm still happy." She looked around at the other cats, who were listening with mixed expressions on their faces. She shrugged, twitching her whiskers. "I could've done worse," she said mischievously.

She heard the purrs of amusement from everyone around her, and her joke seemed to have cheered Sorrelstream up a little. "I'm glad you're happy," Sorrelstream told Minnow.

Minnow purred, then shifted on the barn floor. "Enough about me," she said. "What's new in RiverClan?"

Sorrelstream brightened up. "Pebblenose's kits are growing stronger everyday," she purred. "And my apprentice has become a warrior!"

"That's amazing!" Minnow exclaimed. "You must be proud of her."

Sorrelstream nodded. "Oh, I am. She always was so bright, and such a great learner. All three of them are going to be amazing warriors."

"What are their names now?" Minnow asked. She realized this would have been Birchstar's first warrior naming ceremony.

"Reedtail, Specklefur, and Beechclaw."

"I love it," Minnow said.

The troubled look returned to Sorrelstream's face. "I'm afraid the good news ends there, though."

"What do you mean?"

Sorrelstream sighed. "It's... We've been having so much trouble with ThunderClan and WindClan."

"Trouble?" Minnow echoed. "What kind of trouble?"

"Border trouble," Sorrelstream answered. "And lots of it. We took back Sunningrocks, but we'll often find ThunderClan scent on our side of the border. We've caught WindClan scent, too, and a couple times we've even run off WindClan patrols. Duskstar and Featherstar both deny that their cats are trespassing, and it's like they don't even know. If I didn't know better, I'd say Copperfoot and Wasptail are at the head of it."

Minnow's mind was reeling. Copperfoot had always been a snake, ambitious and battle-hungry. She'd never known much about Wasptail, but based on his constant sour expression she wouldn't put it past him to be the same way. What could the two of them want with RiverClan, let alone together?

Sorrelstream went on. "And there's so much divide now. ThunderClan and WindClan warriors have been cutting ties with their friends in RiverClan and ShadowClan. Gatherings are tense, and everyone is hostile towards each other."

Minnow flicked her tail. "Well, cats *are* supposed to remain loyal to their Clans," she countered, but she knew it was a weak excuse. It wasn't against the warrior code to form friendships with cats from other Clans, and she knew that she wouldn't have sacrificed her friendship with Icetail and Snakefang, the two ShadowClan littermates, in the way that Sorrelstream was describing. She sighed. "It sounds like a mess."

"It is," Sorrelstream replied. "I don't know what's going to come of it; no one does. And I'm scared to be having kits with so much uncertainty. I don't want them to live in constant danger."

Minnow reached out a paw and placed it on Sorrelstream's. "Your kits will be okay," she promised. "RiverClan will look after them."

Gratefulness shone in Sorrelstream's eyes, and she hauled herself to her paws. "Thank you, Minnow," she said, brushing her muzzle against Minnow's. "I should get going. I don't want anyone to worry that I'm not back."

Minnow escorted Sorrelstream out of the barn, offering to walk her back to the edge of RiverClan territory, but she shook her head. "I'll be okay on my own," she reassured Minnow. She hesitated, then said, "Goodbye again. May StarClan light your path."

Minnow didn't bother with sour thoughts, instead saying, "Good luck." She watched in silence as Sorrelstream climbed the hill and disappeared into the trees. For the first time, Minnow found herself almost wanting to return with her.

Chapter 18

Minnow watched the forest long after Sorrelstream's tail slipped out of view. It was well past sunhigh now, and birds streaked across the sky as they headed back towards their nests in the trees. A gentle breeze was the only sound Minnow heard, and for once she longed for the chatter of Clan life to fill the noiseless void around her.

"You miss it, don't you?" She hadn't even heard Apollo approach, but now he was standing at her side.

Minnow sighed. "Of course I miss it," she breathed, turning to look at him. "How could I not?" As much as she tried to tell herself she didn't long for her old life, she did. Though she'd made peace, and found another kind of happiness, out here at the Twoleg farm, nothing would ever compare to the life she was born into.

Minnow saw the other cats approach as well, and Jay said, "Would you go back if you could?"

As soon as the question was out of his mouth, Minnow knew there was no way she'd be able to answer it. She'd devoted her life to RiverClan, only to be cast out of the forest by her warrior ancestors. Then she had come to the barn and found a new purpose, and friends to share her life with. Knowing how much it had hurt to put RiverClan behind her, she wasn't sure how it would feel to do it all over again. "I *can't* go back," she said at last. She was glad to be able to rely on that excuse, though it made her feel guilty and rotten. Was she relying on that fact?

Minnow shook herself, as if trying to shake away the negative thoughts. "There's no use worrying about it," she said, her voice lighter. She knew it was true; she could live with the fact that a life in RiverClan wasn't possible for her, and she supposed talking to Sorrelstream every now and then wouldn't hurt much. She was okay, and she would continue to be okay. "I think I'll go to the pond for a while." She looked past them at the water vole that one of them had brought into the barn; she'd forgotten all about it. "Feel

free to give the vole to Storm and Rose."

The looks on the other cats' faces told Minnow they were relieved at her attitude, and she felt a purr rising within her. As she turned to head towards the pond, she heard pawsteps following her, and she knew Apollo was coming along. "I think I'll come, too," he said as he walked.

Minnow's whiskers twitched in amusement, and she hoped Apollo didn't see. *Of course he'd invite himself,* she thought. "Okay," she called back to him, "but don't drown on my watch!"

Apollo sped up until he was walking next to her, and he shot her a look, amber eyes gleaming. "I'll have you know I can swim just fine," he meowed, pretending to be offended.

Minnow cocked an ear. "Oh, yeah?" she mewed challengingly. "Want to put that to the test?"

"You're on!" In a flash the black-pelted tom bounded ahead, nearly leaping into the pond. Cool water splashed Minnow as she stood at the edge of the water, shaking droplets from her whiskers.

"Now you're getting it!" Minnow called, jumping in the water after Apollo. He had already sped away through the water, churning his paws quickly. Minnow was shocked at how well his swimming skills had come along; she actually had trouble catching up to him! His larger size slowed him down just enough that she managed to stretch out her neck and grab his tail in her teeth. "Got you," she mumbled around his black fur.

Purring with amusement, Apollo shook himself violently and Minnow was thrown off him, sputtering as her head went under water. She splashed her way back to the surface to see Apollo racing through the pond around her.

Astonished at his skill, Minnow said, "You look like you're trying to prove something."

Apollo neared her and slowed down until he was stopped, facing her. He shrugged, laughter in his eyes. "You're not the only good

swimmer now, *kitty,"* he teased.

Minnow splashed him. "Don't call me kitty!" She fought back a purr.

"Or what?" Apollo taunted, swimming closer.

Minnow backed up. "Or I'll put nettles in your nest!" She threatened, whiskers twitching. She felt her paws graze the mud on the bottom of the pond and turned to see that she was at the bank. She hauled herself out of the water and waited for Apollo to follow her before she shook her pelt rigorously, drenching him.

"You're so mean to me," Apollo muttered as he shook his own fur. Minnow chuckled.

The sun was starting to set now, and Minnow could see the faintest outline of the moon in the sky. It was full again, and seeing it reminded Minnow of just how long she had been away from her Clan. She had left at the beginning of leaf-fall, and now it was the beginning of greenleaf. *Almost six moons,* she thought to herself. *It doesn't feel like that long.* Once again, Minnow was unsure of how to feel about that.

Darkness fell and the full moon climbed high, and Minnow sat on the barn roof watching it ascend. The air was still and warm, and a feeling of uneasiness prickled her pelt. With tensions so high between the Clans, what would happen at the Gathering tonight? Part of her wanted to not care about it so much, but she couldn't help it. Knowing that somehow, her old enemy Copperfoot was involved in the threat against her Clan, her mind couldn't rest easy. Copperfoot had terrorized her as an apprentice and tried to kill her, then taunted her at every turn. She remembered talking to the younger ThunderClan warriors and hearing that many ThunderClan cats weren't fans of Copperfoot, and didn't think he was the best choice of deputy. *He shouldn't have been made deputy at all,* Minnow thought. *He had never trained an apprentice, and he only became Rainpaw's mentor because Duskstar wanted him as deputy.* Minnow wondered what was so special about the brutish warrior to break the warrior code.

Minnow heard the clambering of paws and turned towards the hole

in the roof, unsurprised to see Apollo's dark head poking out. She could faintly hear the voices of Jay, Smokey, and the kits playing inside the barn. Apollo hauled himself onto the roof and nodded to Minnow in greeting. She returned his nod before looking back at the sky.

"What's going on?" Apollo asked nonchalantly, stretching.

A moment passed. "It's a full moon," Minnow replied, fighting off her previous thoughts. She couldn't help RiverClan, and there was no use fretting over Copperfoot. With any luck, she'd never see him again.

Apollo nodded slowly, looking a little confused. "Yeah," he said, the word drawn out as he furrowed his brow. "What's special about that?"

Minnow sighed. Would it be worth it to explain Clan Gatherings and why her mind was stuck on it? Or would it be too confusing? Then again, the barn cats hadn't had too much trouble taking in all the things she'd spouted about Clan life previously. Maybe it wasn't all as complicated as it seemed.

"Every full moon," Minnow explained, "the four Clans meet at Fourtrees to share tongues with each other, and the four leaders stand on the Great Rock and share their Clans' news. During the Gathering, there is a truce mandated by StarClan, so the Clans can't fight each other."

"So there's peace at the Gathering?" Apollo said.

Shrugging, Minnow replied, "More or less. Just because the Clan cats have to remain civil doesn't mean there isn't tension. Some cats form friendships across Clan boundaries, but others are always itching for a fight, even at Gatherings."

"Like that Copperfoot cat that Sorrelstream mentioned?"

Minnow nodded slowly. "He's the deputy of ThunderClan, and he's nothing but a bully and a tyrant." She paused. "He almost killed me as an apprentice, and if I ever saw him again, I'd rip his pelt off."

She hadn't meant to say all that, but even thinking of Copperfoot made her blood run hot. She could feel Apollo watching her, and there was a strange expression on his face, and she waited for him to say anything.

After a while, he did. "You said the Gathering is at a place called Fourtrees?" He asked. "Is that the cluster of oaks on the moor, with the massive rock between them?"

Minnow snapped her head towards him. He'd seen Fourtrees then? "Yes," she replied. "It's the only neutral ground for the Clans. Have you been there?"

Apollo shook his head, then flicked his ears toward a hill not too far away from the Twoleg farm, in the direction of the moor. "You can see Fourtrees from that rise over there," he told Minnow, and her eyes widened. She looked to where he had pointed; there was no way that hill was in any Clans' territory, but could she really see Fourtrees from there? She felt a prickling in her paws and she itched to see for herself. Apollo seemed to notice this, and asked tentatively, "Do you want to go there?"

Minnow suppressed a sigh, almost second-guessing herself, but she couldn't let it go. "Yes," she replied softly. With a small nod, Apollo led the way down to the ground below, and Minnow followed. The two walked silently towards the moor, with no sound between them except for the slow night wind. Minnow's heart began to race as they walked farther. Would she really be able to see Fourtrees without entering Clan territories? She had wondered about it once before, but was too scared to ever try. But now that Apollo was leading her, her fear had subsided.

Before she knew it, Minnow and Apollo were nearing the top of the hill, and Minnow could already see that it sloped sharply downwards. She paused to take a deep breath, looking up to the sky. The round, full moon was at its highest point. Apollo waited patiently while Minnow collected herself, and after another moment she padded forward and looked down. Just as Apollo had said, Fourtrees was in plain sight, and the view of it could not have been more perfect. She was just far enough away to feel safe, but close enough to see the branches of each of the four towering oaks, and

the Great Rock between them. Minnow could see that the Clans had gathered, and she heard a small sound from Apollo, a mixture of curiosity and surprise. Minnow realized he'd probably never seen the Clans before, and now he was witnessing them all at once.

"I can't believe it," Minnow breathed, unable to take her eyes off the slow-moving shapes of cats in the Gathering hollow. "All this time, it's been right here. So close."

Apollo nodded once but said nothing. The movement was settling down, and Minnow could vaguely see the shapes of the four leaders taking their place on the Great Rock as the Gathering began. "So what's going on?" Apollo finally asked, cocking his head and sitting down.

Minnow sat as well, feeling a breath escape her that she hadn't realized she'd been holding in. "It's starting," she meowed. "The leaders of each Clan climb onto the Great Rock where everyone can see them. Then they take turns sharing the news."

"Who are the leaders?" Apollo asked.

Minnow replied, "Birchstar is RiverClan's leader. He was deputy to Ashstar when I left, and his name was Birchclaw then. Duskstar is ThunderClan's leader, Featherstar is WindClan's, and Berrystar is ShadowClan's. She was deputy to Tanglestar when I lived in the forest, and her name was Berryfoot."

Apollo looked confused. "Wait, cats change names when they become leader?" His brow was furrowed, and Minnow felt a little amused.

She purred lightly. "Clan cats have different names depending on their role within the Clan," she explained. "Kits' names end in 'kit,' while apprentices' names end in 'paw,' before they become warriors. After their apprenticeship is over, the leader of the Clan grants them their own name during their warrior ceremony. And once a deputy becomes leader, StarClan gives them their 'star' name and nine lives to lead their Clan with."

"Nine lives?" Apollo's eyes flew open wide. "Wow," he breathed. "So

what kind of news do the Clans share?"

Minnow wrapped her tail around her paws. "They say if any kits have been born, if there are new apprentices or warriors, or if any cats have died. If there's any other news that the other Clans need to know, they'll be told at the Gathering. Usually they report badgers or dogs or Twoleg activity."

Minnow was going to continue speaking but movement from below caught her eye. To her shock, a large portion of the gathered cats was moving away from the rest, heading towards the moor. Minnow's ears flattened and her heart nearly stopped. *WindClan is leaving early,* she realized. Though she couldn't hear anything from so far away, she could feel a thick wave of tension rolling from the hollow.

Apollo seemed to notice as well, and Minnow felt his pelt prickle beside her. "What's happening?" he whispered.

"I don't know," Minnow admitted. "But usually when one Clan leaves early, it's because there was an argument of some kind." She remembered what Sorrelstream had said about WindClan and ThunderClan trespassers. "It's probably because Featherstar won't acknowledge that her cats are crossing Clan boundaries." The rest of the Clans were stirring below, moving in between each other, and Minnow knew there was something going on. "No, no," she murmured, fearing that the Clans were angering StarClan. She looked fearfully to the sky, and her heart sank as she saw clouds moving quickly to cover the moon. "StarClan is angry."

Apollo followed Minnow's gaze. "That's bad, isn't it?"

Minnow nodded, feeling tense. "Yes," she meowed. "They've stopped the Gathering because the truce has been broken. StarClan sends clouds to cover the moon to stop the Clans from fighting, and that means the Gathering is over." The rest of the cats separated into three groups and began to make their way towards their respective territories, and anxiety stirred within Minnow.

"Are you worried about it?" she heard Apollo ask.

Taking a deep breath, Minnow tried to compose herself. It wasn't her problem. "Tensions rise and fall all the time," she said, trying to sound calm. "The Clans are capable of dealing with their problems."

Apollo didn't look convinced, and Minnow knew that no matter what she said, there was a worry that she couldn't shake, rooted in the things Sorrelstream had told her. There was a real problem amongst the Clans, and she was afraid that it was only going to get worse.

Chapter 19

The sun blazed hot overhead, drenching the land below in a thick blanket of heat. Minnow panted as she faced off with Apollo, and she was beginning to regret training in the middle of the day. But she knew it was good to practice in all kinds of weather, so she was bearing it, but she was growing tired and thirsty. Her mouth was dry and parched, and the grass was hot against her paw pads. But if Apollo could manage with his thick, dark pelt, Minnow knew she could as well.

Apollo threw himself at her, paws outstretched to grab her shoulders. Minnow ducked, narrowly avoiding him, and slithered underneath his belly, swiping with her own paws. Behind him now, she leaped for his back, only to find him rolling, and their paws met in a furry tangle. Minnow was caught off guard by Apollo's sudden flip, but managed to keep her footing as she landed on top of him. As quickly as she could, she tried to jump away, but Apollo managed to wrap his paws around her legs and send her buckling towards the ground. *He's gotten so much better,* Minnow thought to herself. She regained her footing and turned to face him again.

Apollo moved faster, diving forward towards her legs, and Minnow jumped to the side, batting his head hard and biting his tail. Triumph surged through her, but it was short-lived as Apollo rounded on her again, this time attacking her with swift paw swipes, and Minnow found herself backing up and hastily trying to dodge his blows. Frantically, Minnow stopped backing away and instead threw herself at her opponent, hoping to catch him off guard. Apollo recoiled quickly, though, and grabbed Minnow by her shoulders and threw her onto the ground hard, where she landed with a thud. Pain seared through her head from how hard she landed, and she hissed through her teeth.

Immediately, Apollo was hovering over her. "Are you okay?" he asked quickly. Minnow pushed herself up and avoided his gaze. Her pelt was hot with embarrassment.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she replied, leaning down to give her chest a quick lick.

Apollo's face was scrunched up with worry, his amber eyes wide. "Are you sure?" he pressed, stepping closer to Minnow.

Minnow took a step back, growing a little annoyed. "Yeah, I'm fine," she repeated. "Trust me, I've been hurt worse." Her head was throbbing a little, but she knew it wasn't bad.

Apollo's ears twitched, and he looked unsure. "Okay," he meowed slowly. "I just don't want you to get hurt." After a moment of awkward silence, he went on, "Are you *sure* you're okay? Maybe you should go lie down in the barn for a while."

A mixture of embarrassment and rage seared through Minnow. "I said I'm *fine*!" she snapped, causing Apollo to jump. "I'm not a kit! I can take care of myself!" *Great StarClan, it's not like I've been mortally wounded! I just bumped my head on the ground!*

Hearing the commotion, Jay and Smokey had approached. "What's going on?" Smokey asked. "Are you hurt, Minnow?"

A low growl escaped Minnow's throat. "No!" she exclaimed. "Apollo knocked me down, but I'm perfectly okay! Why does everyone have to moon over me like I'm helpless?" She kneaded the grass with her claws, tail lashing behind her.

Silence came from the cats around Minnow, and she met their gazes through narrowed eyes. Jay and Smokey looked unsure of how to feel, but Apollo's face was... sad. Minnow recoiled, then silently cursed herself. How long had it been since she had snapped at any cat like that? Since she'd jumped to being defensive every time a cat spoke to her? It had been long before she called the barn "home," before she had recognized these cats as friends. And in just a heartbeat, she'd stepped a paw back into the cat she was before. And it had hurt Apollo.

Minnow almost growled again, but stopped herself. *What a fish-brain,* she scolded herself. "I'm going for a walk," she said bluntly, then turned and stomped away before anyone could say anything.

The heat continued to bear down and only worsened Minnow's mood as she wandered away from the other cats. Maybe she had been wrong to snap at Apollo, but why had he even been so concerned? When she had first come to the barn, Apollo was just some mysterious, black-pelted loner who was too cool for anyone else, who came and went as he pleased and didn't care about much but himself. Lately, Minnow thought, he didn't wander at all, acted like a second father to Storm and Rose, and was worried about Minnow for barely a scratch.

He's gotten so soft, Minnow realized. She stopped walking underneath the shade of a tree in the Twoleg garden. *All this time learning to swim and fight, and he managed to get soft.* Minnow scoffed to herself, for a moment thinking that it was a little pathetic. Then she stopped herself, realizing how awful she was being. Of course Apollo had changed, but hadn't she done the same? He'd grown stronger and faster, and perhaps more compassionate. Now he knew how to fend for himself, yet he chose to remain at the barn rather than wander. He'd been interested to learn about the Clans and about the life Minnow had led before coming here. And, just now, he had been genuinely concerned that he had hurt her.

That's not softness, Minnow thought, once again scolding herself. *That's how friends are supposed to act.* She wanted to be angry but she knew it was wrong, and it was unfair of her to be mad at Apollo simply for being concerned. She *had* hit her head pretty hard, and even now it was throbbing, but she'd fared far worse when she lived in the forest.

For StarClan's sake, I died *before*, she said silently. Clan life was far more unforgiving than life as a loner, but that was something the barn cats knew nothing about.

Minnow stopped herself again, fighting back another growl. Of *course* they'd know nothing about that, but how could she ever expect them to? And how could she hold it against them? Why, at every turn, did she have to compare her two vastly different lives? How could she really put her past behind her when she continued to draw connections to it?

"That's the real issue, isn't it?" Minnow murmured aloud to herself.

"This isn't the forest, and this isn't a Clan." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling some of her annoyance leaving her. She relaxed her shoulders, which until now she hadn't realized had been stiffened, and swished her tail over the grass. She owed Apollo an apology. She owed them all one.

After a few more moments of sitting in silence, Minnow began to make her way back to the other cats. She found them in the barn, recovering from the heat and the tiring battle practice, grooming messy fur and basking in the shade. Apollo tentatively met Minnow's gaze, and she ducked away from it, embarrassed at her actions. In the far corner, Storm and Rose were clumsily stalking around a pile of hay, no doubt practicing hunting mice. A small purr rose in her throat.

Minnow looked back at the other cats. "I'm sorry," she blurted before she could allow herself time to gather her thoughts. She looked directly at Apollo. "I'm sorry I snapped at you. You had every right to be concerned."

Apollo's eyes brightened at her words, and Minnow's shoulders sagged with relief that he wasn't angry with her. "It's okay," he replied. "I know you can take care of yourself. Sometimes I forget that you drove off that fox. It would take more than a bump on the head to keep you down." His whiskers twitched with amusement, and Minnow purred.

She looked at Jay and Smokey now. "I'm sorry to you, too," she meowed.

Jay's eyes narrowed in confusion. "What for?"

Smokey's expression mirrored her mate's. "You have nothing to apologize to us for."

Minnow sat. "I do, though," she said softly, wondering how to say what she was thinking. "Ever since I came here, I've had trouble putting my past behind me. And even now that this is my home, I can't help but think of it as the forest, you know? I was just so used to that kind of life that it's like I still had a paw there. I haven't been fair to you all because of that, because I keep comparing it to life in

RiverClan. So, I'm sorry."

There was a long silence, and Minnow found it hard to look the other cats in the eye. She was ashamed of herself, and she hoped Jay, Smokey, and Apollo wouldn't hold it against her. She felt a brush of fur against her own pelt and turned to see Smokey pressing against her. "Don't worry about that," she mewed, her eyes warm and kind. She stepped away and sat facing Minnow. "We would never expect you to forget your Clan roots."

"Yeah," Apollo said. "If you did, you'd never have taught us everything we know now."

Jay purred, the sound a low rumble in his throat. "You've taught us how to protect our kits, and soon we can teach them to protect themselves. Some days I think I should thank your... StarClan or whatever for sending you out here." Minnow couldn't help but purr with amusement.

Smokey put a paw on Minnow's. "Maybe, no matter where you are, a small part of you will always belong in RiverClan."

Minnow's eyes trailed away, pointing down towards the floor. Something about Smokey's words didn't sit right. "Yeah," she mumbled, wondering if it was more than just a *small* part of her.

Chapter 20

Minnow dreamed of RiverClan that night. Almost as soon as her head hit her nest, the scent of river water and reeds flooded her nose, and she found herself deep in a dream, standing in the middle of the RiverClan camp. Bright light flooded the little island from above, and it was blissfully warm. She could hear bubbling from the little streams that divided the camp from the forest, and the playful squeaking of kits and chatter of Clan cats surrounded her. Looking around, she recognized the pelts of Ashstar and Birchclaw speaking outside Ashstar's den, along with Nightwhisper, who was grooming his long, black fur. Outside the warriors' den, Twigtail and Nettlestep shared a fish, while Sorrelstream and Mudpelt groomed each other's fur. She could see Troutleap and Blacktail sunning themselves outside the elders' den, and just a few tail-lengths away, Ripplekit, Sootkit, and Amberkit were locked in a playful tussle.

They wouldn't still be that small, Minnow thought to herself as she watched her siblings, still kits, play. *They're almost warriors now, aren't they?* Minnow sighed contentedly as she watched her former Clanmates. Ashstar and Blacktail were in StarClan now, and her siblings were nearing the end of their apprenticeship, she knew. But she didn't mind seeing her old home like this; she felt so at peace here, just existing in this dreamy space, and it soothed her. None of the other cats seemed to notice her, but she didn't mind that, either. She closed her eyes and let the sun warm her pelt, and took in a deep, slow breath, content to spend just a little longer with her old Clan.

When Minnow opened her eyes, she saw nothing but darkness. Her heart sped up in her chest. She could no longer feel the warm sun, or hear the chatter of the RiverClan cats, or even see them. She turned frantically, fighting the urge to call out. Then a mixture of scents hit her nose, rooting her to the spot with fear. She made out the smell of ThunderClan and WindClan, which she could remember so vividly that it was like she was still in the forest. But over that, drowning her nostrils, was the scent of blood; lots and

lots of blood, mingling with fear-scent, a horrible tide that threatened to knock her off her paws.

"Minnow!" She heard a distant voice calling her, almost too faint to make out. "Minnow!" It sounded almost like Sorrelstream, but Minnow still couldn't see anything, just blackness.

"Minnow!" Minnow jolted awake at the sound of Apollo's voice, nearly jumping out of her nest. She blinked rapidly, looking around. She wasn't surrounded by darkness like in her dream, and the scents of blood and enemy Clans were gone. Apollo stood over her, prodding her with his forepaw, a worried look on his face. "Are you okay?" he asked. "You were twitching in your sleep."

Beyond him, Minnow could see Jay and Smokey playing with Storm and Rose, and the Twoleg garden beyond the barn entrance was just lit up with early morning sunlight, but thick dark clouds were in sight. Minnow felt her breathing even out, and calmness washed over her. "I'm fine," she said to Apollo, who seemed to relax. "Just a bad dream."

Minnow stood and stretched, shaking loose bits of hay from her speckled pelt, and tried to shove away her fear from her dream. She couldn't seem to stop thinking about Sorrelstream's visit, how worried she had been, or the incident at the Gathering. Even though Minnow hadn't been there, she knew exactly what was going on. Something was causing a divide between the Clans, far more than what was ordinary. She knew it wasn't her problem to deal with, or even be a part of, but she couldn't block the thoughts from entering her mind.

Shaking her head, Minnow padded over to Jay and Smokey and sat down near them, reaching a paw up to lick it. As she groomed, she saw Jay turn to look at her, while Smokey continued to play with her kits. "Bad dream?" The dark gray tom asked.

Minnow paused her grooming. "Yeah," was all she said, but she could feel Jay's eyes still on her, and she heard Apollo approach from behind. He sat next to her and joined in with Storm and Rose, purring. The two kits turned their attention away from their mother and focused solely on Apollo, clambering over his back and

dragging him to the ground. Minnow's whiskers twitched with amusement as she watched his dark frame sink under the weight of the kits.

An orange figure appeared at the entrance of the barn, and Minnow looked up to see Oliver walking in. Between playing with the kits and practicing his battle moves every once in a while, the kittypet had slimmed down a fair amount. He was still a far cry from a forest cat, but if Minnow didn't know him, she wouldn't peg him for a kittypet.

"Oliver!" Rose shouted as soon as she saw him. She clambered roughly off Apollo and raced towards Oliver, followed quickly by Storm. Oliver approached the group and sat as well.

"Morning," he greeted, his mew cut off by a wide yawn. "Sleep well?"

"Most of us," Apollo meowed, shrugging. Minnow flicked him with her tail, and he smirked.

"I slept fine," she said. "Cats have bad dreams all the time."

Smokey turned towards her. "What did you dream about?"

Minnow hesitated, and in the silence Oliver asked, "Is it the Clan troubles?"

Sighing, Minnow nodded. She supposed there was no point in hiding anything, not when even Storm and Rose knew about it all at this point. "I just... what Sorrelstream told me is still kind of bothering me."

"Plus that Gathering seemed pretty tense," Apollo put in.

Minnow nodded and laid down, tucking her paws neatly under her. "I don't know if it should bother me or not, but it does."

"It's bound to," Smokey reasoned. "There's no shame in being worried."

"Is there anything you can do to help them?" Oliver asked. "If there

was, maybe it wouldn't worry you so much."

Minnow shook her head. "I can't. It wouldn't be a good idea for me to step a paw into Clan territories, let alone try to fix their conflicts. I'm not even sure what's happening."

"Why can't the Clans just get along?" Rose piped up, cocking her head to the side. "Why can't they be friends and help each other?"

Minnow wished she could validate the young cat's optimism, knowing all too well how much easier it would be if the Clans didn't fight. "The four Clans are always at each other for something," she told Rose. "It's usually prey or borders. Sometimes it's just petty rivalry." She sighed. "Asking them to get along would be like asking a mouse to volunteer itself as a meal."

Storm's brow furrowed. "Then why can't they be one Clan instead of four? Would that be easier?"

Minnow shook her head again. "There have to be four Clans. That's how it's always been, since the beginning of Clans. Since the beginning of StarClan themselves."

Jay shrugged. "There would probably be *more* fighting if all the Clans united," he meowed. "There would be arguments over leadership."

"I'm not sure the problem even concerns all the Clans," Minnow added. "As far as I can tell, ShadowClan isn't involved. RiverClan is only involved because they're being constantly harassed and trespassed on. I didn't want to believe it at first, but I think Sorrelstream might be right."

"About what?" Oliver asked.

Minnow's tail swished. "I think ThunderClan and WindClan might really be allies somehow, in some plot against RiverClan."

"But if their leaders are oblivious, are they really part of it?" Apollo kneaded the ground with his claws. "Or is it Copperfoot and that WindClan cat?"

"Wasptail," Minnow confirmed. "What's weird is that they're the deputies of their Clans." Minnow's mind was reeling with thoughts, but she couldn't connect any of them. "If anything, they should be hating each other, not working together somehow."

The cats all fell silent, thinking. Minnow felt conflicted, torn between wanting to find answers and putting it all out of her head. Her gaze fell away from her friends, and she thought about Sorrelstream. Her friend had admitted to being scared of kitting when threats pressed in on RiverClan from every border. Minnow couldn't imagine that kind of fear, and she pictured Storm and Rose in the middle of the conflict. The idea ignited a small flame inside her, and she knew without a doubt how hard she would fight for those kits, for any kits.

Minnow felt Apollo press his pelt comfortingly against hers. "Sorrelstream will be okay," he murmured, as if sensing her thoughts. "She seems like a strong cat. If all of the cats of RiverClan are half the cat you are, they'll be okay."

Minnow couldn't help but feel some of her worry melt away at Apollo's words, and she pressed against him as well, relishing in the comfort of a friend. Maybe it wouldn't fix things, but it made her feel the slightest bit better.

Chapter 21

The dark clouds moved in quickly and soon heavy rain descended over the forest and the Twoleg farm, drenching the ground and littering it with huge puddles. After nearly three days of rain, the barn cats were relieved to see that the clouds had moved on, and the sun shone brightly again. Now that greenleaf was here in full force, it was hot and the air was thick with humidity. It was hard to spend too long outside the barn during the day, so the cats didn't do much battle practice. Sometimes, Minnow would swim in the pond to cool off, and other times her friends would join her.

Just two days after the rain subsided, the heat seemed to have slackened a bit, and Minnow was relieved to not have to stay in the barn for fear of scorching her pelt. She and the other cats, including Oliver and the kits, basked in the sun outside on the warm grass, purring contentedly. Minnow was half-asleep when a distant screech caused her to jump.

"Minnow!" The call came from far away, and Minnow scrambled to her paws, looking frantically around her. Then she spotted movement at the top of the hill that led to the forest, and streaking towards the barn, faster than Minnow had ever seen any cat run, was Sorrelstream. "Minnow!" she called again as she got closer, her voice thick with fear.

The other cats had risen as well and now stood around Minnow, all with expressions of worry and confusion. Sorrelstream was hurtling quickly towards them and skidded to a halt, and Minnow could see by the size of her friend's belly that she had kitted. A surge of joy ran through her, quickly replaced by fear at Sorrelstream's expression. "Sorrelstream?" she meowed cautiously as the sand-colored warrior gasped and fought for breath, her flanks heaving with the effort. "What's going on?"

Sorrelstream's head snapped up and her eyes met Minnow's, wide as an owl's. "It's happening!" she exclaimed. "It's happening right now!"

Minnow padded forward slowly, her heartbeat growing faster. "What's happening?" she asked, but somehow she already knew.

Sorrelstream's breath was evening out, but fear-scent still rolled off of her in waves. "ThunderClan and WindClan!" she mewed frantically. "They're invading RiverClan! We're outnumbered and we need help! They're being led by Copperfoot and Wasptail!"

Minnow's blood ran cold and her breathing stopped for the shortest moment. Copperfoot's face flashed through her mind, and she remembered her dream. *So they* have *been planning something all along,* she thought to herself.

"Come on, we can't waste any time!" Sorrelstream's voice tore Minnow from her thoughts.

Minnow took a step backwards. "What do you mean?" she asked.

Sorrelstream's expression remained frantic. "I mean, we have to go now! RiverClan is outnumbered!" she repeated. "We need you!"

Minnow hesitated, feeling everyone's eyes on her. For a moment she felt like she was being torn into pieces, and panic began to set in. She knew all too well what returning to the Clan territories would do to her former Clanmates. If she went back now, the curse would resume taking the lives of RiverClan cats. And without a doubt, Minnow knew that that would be far worse than whatever ThunderClan and WindClan were doing right now.

"No," she said softly, the word painful on her tongue.

"What?" Sorrelstream cried.

Minnow couldn't bear to meet Sorrelstream's gaze. "I can't go back, and you know that. It's not safe. I'm sorry." She imagined the waves of enemy warriors bearing down on RiverClan, and she squeezed her eyes shut, hoping to block it out. It pained her to tell Sorrelstream no, but she knew in her heart that it wasn't a good idea to go back. Aside from the curse, Minnow knew that if she returned to help, it would reveal that she was alive. Selfishly, she wanted them to believe otherwise, and she felt guilt gnawing at her.

All she wanted to do was remain here at the barn, dead to the Clans, free from the burdens of StarClan and forest life. "I know RiverClan can handle their problems on their own." Even saying those words hurt, knowing the danger that RiverClan was currently in.

Sorrelstream was silent for a few moments, and no other cat spoke a word either. After what felt like an eternity, Sorrelstream screeched, "You can't be serious!" Minnow finally looked at her friend, whose fearful expression was now mixed with rage. "The Clan you once loved is being torn apart! We need help if we're even going to survive this attack! I risked so much to come find you!" Her voice was growing louder as she continued on. "I left my *kits* to come here! Our camp is being attacked and I *left* them, hoping that you would come back with me!" Her voice cracked with emotion at the end, and Minow felt a change.

"Okay," she said simply. There was no way she could stay away from this battle, she knew in her heart. No matter what StarClan had done to her, no matter that RiverClan had once hated her, she knew Smokey had been right before. A part of her *would* always belong in RiverClan, and despite the curse and the moons that separated her life in RiverClan from her life now, RiverClan would always be her Clan. And right now, they needed her. "I'll come back."

Sorrelstream visibly relaxed, and gratefulness washed over her face. "Thank you," she breathed.

"I'm coming too." Minnow was caught by surprise at Apollo's voice, and turned to look at him. His face held a look of gritty determination. "If RiverClan needs help, I'll join the fight as well."

"So will we," Jay added before Minnow could say anything, sharing a quick nod with his mate.

"After all you've done for us," Smokey meowed, "this is the least we can do in return. We'll come, too."

"What about Storm and Rose?" Minnow asked, eyeing the two kits, who were watching the conversation unfold with mixed expressions

of excitement and fear. "They'll need someone to stay with them."

"I'll do it," Oliver said immediately. He met Minnow's gaze evenly. "Go help your Clan," he said to her before turning to Jay and Smokey. "Come home to your kits."

Looking at the cats around her, Minnow thought that she couldn't be more proud of the unity and spirit they were all showing. She was still apprehensive about what she was about to do, but she didn't have time to think about it. "Come on, we have to go now!" Sorrelstream said quickly before turning tail, going back in the direction she had come. Without another word, the other four cats followed, racing quickly up the hill, the rush of the upcoming battle settling over them as they headed for the forest.

Chapter 22

The patrol moved quickly, nearly flying over the forest floor as they pressed on. The dangling branches of willow trees brushed their pelts and the ferns were soft underpaw, but all Minnow could hear was the rushing of blood in her ears. They were so close to the RiverClan border, and before Minnow could even stop to think about what she was about to do, they were past it and in RiverClan territory. Still they pressed on.

"So what exactly is the plan here?" Apollo called to the others as they ran. Minnow glanced at him, and a rush of admiration surged through her. She wished she could stop and take a moment to thank him for coming along, and for all he'd done for her in the past few moons. When she had first met him, she would never have guessed that they would eventually grow this close. And now, they were going head-first into an unpredictable battle, neither of them knowing what to expect.

"Smell that?" Sorrelstream called back. Minnow took a deep whiff of the air, letting the familiar scent of RiverClan and its territory bathe her tongue. Anxiety clawed at her. "That's RiverClan! Don't attack cats with that scent!"

They were close to the RiverClan camp now, and Minnow's mind was racing as quickly as her paws. *This is it,* she thought. *It's bad enough I'm back beneath StarClan's skies.* The faintest sounds of battle sounded from ahead; they were just a few heartbeats away. *Just a little farther and my whole world comes crumbling down.*

Everything seemed to slow as the patrol drew closer, and Minnow's mind grew still for a short moment. *What have I become?* She thought. *Do I really only care about myself? Do I only care about keeping my secret, and about living in my own little world?* Minnow saw the cats around her: Sorrelstream, her oldest friend, who had risked the lives of her Clan and kits to call for aid from Minnow; Jay and Smokey, who had taken her in when she was at her lowest, and given her a home and a purpose; and Apollo, who had helped

her to rediscover herself and provided her with a bond she hadn't known she needed. They weren't a Clan, but they were the closest thing to that since Minnow had left RiverClan. Whatever they did, they would do together, and right now, that meant saving RiverClan from potential destruction. No matter what curses lay over her, Minnow knew deep down that there was nothing she wouldn't do to help save RiverClan.

And just like that, the battle was upon them. Yowling and screeching drowned out the sounds of the forest and the scent of blood was heavy in the air as the patrol, led by Sorrelstream, burst through the back wall of the RiverClan camp. All around them were fighting cats, and scattered debris from the tattered, battle-torn camp.

Minnow wasted no time in turning to Sorrelstream. "Get to your kits!" she ordered, and her friend nodded once, eyes filled with gratitude, and turned away, bounding off. It was hard to tell friend from foe as cats swarmed around her, and for the first time since they left the barn, she felt genuine fear. Near the camp entrance, she spotted Twigtail's brown form tussling with an enemy warrior, and Cherryheart's tortoiseshell pelt guarded the elders' den, though Troutleap was reared up and battle-ready behind her. Minnow could hardly even recognize some of the RiverClan warriors; they'd all grown and changed so much since she had left. Mudpelt and Poppywhisker were fighting side by side outside the medicine den, and Nightwhisper was struggling to drag Specklefur, injured, away from the fighting.

Finally Minnow spotted a familiar cat, one she knew she could trust. Without a word she sprinted over to Tawnyclaw, the other cats behind her, and jumped out in front of him. Blood dripped down his face from a deep gash above his eye as well as from his teeth, bared in a snarl. His dark pelt was covered in scratches and he was missing large clumps of fur. "Where do you need us?" Minnow asked, shouting over the noise of the battle.

Tawnyclaw stopped dead, his blue eyes widening in shock, his flanks heaving as he fought for breath. He stared at Minnow like he was seeing a spirit of StarClan, then his gaze flicked to the three battle-ready cats at Minnow's side. As much as Minnow wanted to

stop and talk to her former mentor, she knew there were more important things right now, and braced her muscles to fight, flattening her ears and drawing out her claws. Seeming to understand the situation, Tawnyclaw at last gave a firm nod. "Birchstar and Bristlepelt led a patrol to Sunningrocks, but they can't keep up! Go there!" As soon as the words were out of his mouth, turned and was gone, back into the fray.

Wasting no time, Minnow spun and bolted for the camp entrance, trying hard to ignore the fighting cats around her. If she was needed at Sunningrocks, that's where she would go. Her heart nearly stopped cold as she and the other barn cats leaped over a still gray form just outside camp, and she barely recognized Beechclaw. For a moment, she wondered if they had come too late, if she had wasted too much time reasoning with herself about coming at all, but she knew she couldn't worry about that now. They were here, and that's what mattered. Together, they raced for the river.

The sound of battle was everywhere as Minnow, Jay, Smokey, and Apollo practically threw themselves across the rain-swollen river to the other side. Blood was splattered all over the rocks and awful screeching filled the air, angry and frightened. Together, they joined the fighting. Minnow spotted the lean gray shape of Cinderfrost struggling under a massive dark ginger WindClan tom and raced forward, bowling the tom off of her. He hissed and fought under Minnow as she sank her claws into his pelt, and she nipped at his shoulder, feeling her teeth break skin. Kicking up with his hind feet, he shoved Minnow off and ran away. Regaining her footing, Minnow turned to Cinderfrost to check if she was okay.

Cinderfrost's expression was shocked as she pulled herself off the ground, eyes wide. She nodded a quick thanks and returned to the battle. Minnow looked around for other cats to help, but her stomach dropped as she spotted an orange and white pelt laying still on the stones a few tail-lengths away. Nearly crying out, she ran over to see Bristlepelt, his gaze empty and pointed towards the sky. Blood ran from his still-open mouth, and his pelt was shredded and bloodied. Anguish overcame Minnow and she yowled in despair. *This is a slaughter,* she thought helplessly as she stared at her dead father. Rage coursed through her. *It's time to fight.*

Chapter 23

The battle raged on. Minnow finally managed to tear her eyes away from her father's body to analyze the fighting around her. She caught a glimpse of Jay and Smokey fighting side by side against Amberclaw of ThunderClan, and closer to Minnow was Apollo. To her horror, Cloudsplash was rearing up against the black loner, hissing menacingly with his ears flattened. "Who are you?" Minnow heard Cloudsplash snarl as he took a swipe at Apollo. Ducking, Apollo shouted, "I'm here to help you!" before leaping past Cloudsplash, aiming his paws for a cat that Minnow recognized as Swiftsky of ThunderClan, who had been sneaking up on Cloudsplash. Apollo managed to get a few vicious swipes and bites in before Swiftsky ran away. Seeming satisfied with the stranger's intentions, Cloudsplash headed back into the fight.

Minnow then saw Sweetstripe struggling to hold her own against Crowshade of WindClan and suddenly her paws were moving, heading towards her former Clanmate. Sweetstripe was heavily wounded and fighting weakly, and Minnow reached Crowshade and aimed for his back, dragging him off of Sweetstripe with her claws. Yowling in pain, Crowshade turned on Minnow and growled before reaching his dark paws for her throat. Minnow dodged and flew at his belly, swiping with her claws and grabbing a foreleg in her teeth, biting down hard. At the same time, Crowshade's teeth met her back, and hissing, Minnow buckled beneath him. She felt his weight lighten on top of her and took the opportunity to roll away, seeing Sweetstripe dragging Crowshade off the ground. Minnow jumped at him again as Sweetstripe attacked him from behind. A look of panic entered his eyes before he tucked his tail and ran away, disappearing into the mass of fighting cats.

"Minnowpaw? Is that you?" Sweetstripe gasped once the enemy warrior was gone. She was gasping for breath, still bleeding heavily from her wounds, and her eyes were half-glazed over with pain and weariness.

Not bothering to correct Sweetstripe, Minnow said, "You need to get out of here! Get to the medicine den!" Once Sweetstripe was gone, Minnow looked around again. Sunningrocks was nearly unrecognizable, covered with blood and fur and kicked up dust. Minnow wondered how the fight could still be going on, yet every cat was fighting fiercely as if it had just started. Jay and Smokey were still fighting strongly, working side by side as if they were mere extensions of each other, now fighting Dapplenose of ThunderClan, while Apollo was locked in a tussle with a very vicious Sparrowclaw. The dark brown WindClan warrior's ear was torn and his tail lashed as he fought Apollo, matching him blow for blow, and his pelt was soaked with blood.

It was hard to tell who was winning, but Minnow thought, or rather hoped, that the tide of the battle had changed with their arrival. All the same, it showed no signs of slowing, and Minnow still felt strong and able-bodied. She knew that she and her companions could step in and take over where the RiverClan warriors were slowing down and growing weak and weary. She was afraid that she hadn't yet seen Birchstar, and that thought made her worried, but she reminded herself that he was strong, and a leader with nine lives. As horrible as it would be to lose any of them in this fight, Minnow knew that he would fare better no matter what, as the rest of RiverClan had only one life to lose. And all around her, Minnow's friends and former Clanmates fought as if they might die for their victory.

A flash of red came into the corner of Minnow's vision and she looked to see Redblaze grappling heavily with Wasptail, fighting as if the fate of all the Clans weighed on his shoulders. Minnow nearly gasped at the sight of him; he looked so much different now, stronger and grown, nothing like the apprentice she'd once known. Beyond him, Reedtail was swiping at Blacknose, using her lithe form to weave around the ThunderClan tom, who was larger and slower. On Minnow's other side were Amberpaw and Ripplepaw, working together against Patchpaw of WindClan. The larger apprentice was fighting like a warrior, managing to hold his own against Minnow's siblings, despite how well they were working together. *Even the apprentices are fighting fiercely,* Minnow thought. *This is a war.*

Distracted by watching everyone else, Minnow suddenly found herself being bowled over, and the scent of WindClan met her nose as she and her attacker rolled across the hard stones. Minnow felt teeth sink into her ear and she swiped with her claws, fighting to regain her footing. As soon as she did, another body slammed into her, and she found herself facing both Honeytail and Thornpelt of WindClan alone. The two enemy warriors wasted no time in ambushing her, Thornpelt going high and Honeytail going low. Minnow was suddenly grateful that she'd spent the last several moons training heavily with the other barn cats, because otherwise she'd stand no chance. She ducked and wove between the two WindClan cats, biting and scratching any chance she could, trying to avoid their claws. Honeytail bit down hard on Minnow's tail and Thornpelt grabbed her front leg, and Minnow was pulled roughly between the two, yowling in pain and kicking out. She caught a glimpse of black fur and Apollo knocked Thornpelt away, leaving Minnow to deal with Honeytail. The two she-cats grappled and tumbled, kicking and biting, until Minnow managed to drag her claws across Honeytail's throat. It wasn't enough to be fatal, but the WindClan warrior gurgled as blood flowed from the wound, and she retreated. Minnow saw her stop as she neared the WindClan border, and she turned around, heading foolishly back into the fight. Apollo had sent Thornpelt running away as well, and Minnow gasped, "Thanks for the help." Her ear stung and she felt blood running from her tail, but luckily the gash on her front leg was shallow. She noticed that Ripplepaw and Amberpaw were still fighting Patchpaw, who had been joined by Harepaw, and she flicked her tail in their direction and told Apollo, "Help them!" She couldn't bear to think of her siblings dying in this pointless battle.

As Apollo headed towards the apprentices, Minnow's eyes were drawn back to her father's body, which was now being trampled by the battling cats. She fought back a sob and raced towards him, grabbing him by the scruff. Frantically, she dragged his body beneath a small rocky overhang, knowing he would be safe until the battle was over. Looking out from beneath the overhang, Minnow saw another body, immediately relieved that it wasn't a RiverClan warrior; it was Graytail of ThunderClan. She couldn't find any sympathy within herself for the enemy tom. *He chose this fight, no matter who led him here.* Minnow realized she still had not seen

Copperfoot, although Wasptail, his supposed accomplice, was fighting. Had he been too much of a coward to lead his traitorous army into battle? Minnow couldn't think about that now, though, not when the fighting still carried on. It couldn't go on forever, she knew, but the sooner it ended, the fewer warriors would have to die.

No sooner had Minnow left her father's body beneath the shelter of the rocks when a massive enemy warrior slammed into her, reeking of ThunderClan and blood, yowling a triumphant battle cry. She heard the tom sneer at her as his claws dug roughly into her pelt, and she turned to face him. Scrambling to her paws, Minnow became filled with the rage of a Clan full of warriors.

Copperfoot.

Chapter 24

Minnow faced Copperfoot. The burly warrior's shoulders were tense, and his teeth were bared as he looked at Minnow like she was a piece of prey that had fallen into his claws. There were two tail-lengths between them, and Minnow braced herself, drawing out her claws, awaiting his attack. But then Copperfoot's eyes widened the slightest bit before narrowing, a look of mischievous triumph entering them as he at last recognized her.

"Well, well," he taunted, lifting his head. "If it isn't the apprentice."

Minnow hissed.

"Last I heard, you were dead," Copperfoot growled, tail lashing. "Turns out you were just too weak to live in the forest, huh? You've doomed yourself to be an apprentice forever." Copperfoot's eyes darkened, as if a shadow had overtaken them, and in their depths Minnow could see nothing but evil.

"I'm twice the warrior you'll ever be!" Minnow shot back, leaping forward. Copperfoot reared up on his hind legs and, yowling, met her head-on. His claws grasped Minnow's head as she sank her teeth into his shoulder, swiping her claws at his chest. Copperfoot shoved Minnow down and raked his claws across her flank, shredding her pelt. She stood and faced him again, not daring to hesitate for even a moment.

Minnow knew Copperfoot was strong, but somehow he seemed even stronger now. His eyes were still dark, his face twisted, and for a moment he seemed like a different cat altogether. Once again she leaped at him, and knowing he would dodge, twisted in midair to land on his back. She grasped his scruff between her teeth and dug her claws into his back, feeling him struggle to throw her off.

This is it, Copperfoot! Minnow thought to herself. At last the two enemies were giving in to the battle that had been brewing between them for so long, ever since he had attacked her at the river when

she was a helpless apprentice. She jumped off his back, moving nimbly over the stones as Copperfoot attacked. She wasn't an apprentice anymore, and neither was she helpless. Clashing with Copperfoot head-on, her mind raced as she thought of all that had happened since that day he'd almost killed her. She was so much stronger and smarter now. She'd lost everything and gained even more, and now she had returned to the Clans to fight. Maybe, she thought as she drew her claws across Copperfoot's face, that no matter what, no matter that she had left her Clan, this battle with Copperfoot had always been hers to fight. That thought sent a surge of energy through her, and she attacked him hard, kicking at his flanks as he bit down on her shoulder.

"You might as well give up now!" Copperfoot snarled. He held onto Minnow's back and she instinctively rolled, crushing him beneath her, but still his claws dug in. "I will always win! You're weak!"

The two continued rolling, the hard stones of Sunningrocks bruising them all over, fighting with all they had. Blood flew everywhere but Minnow could barely feel her wounds, though she knew there were many. *Weak is the last thing I am!* Minnow thought defiantly. She knew she should feel tired, but instead she was more alive than ever. She felt as if she could go on as long as she needed to, as long as it took for Copperfoot to be defeated.

Minnow finally managed to get the upper paw, pinning Copperfoot onto his back, raking his belly and feeling his blood well up between her claws. Yowling with rage, Copperfoot raised a hind leg and kicked Minnow under her chin, sending her flying. She landed hard on the rocks; they were at the edge of ThunderClan's territory now. "Weak!" Copperfoot spat again, coming closer. Minnow hesitated, feigning exhaustion, and when Copperfoot was over her she rounded on him and dove at his chest, knocking him backwards. His head hit the stones and a gasp of air escaped him. For the shortest moment, the strange darkness left his eyes, and he fumbled for a moment.

Then it was back, and the ThunderClan deputy rose to his paws, swaying lightly, but he managed to come at Minnow again. "You won't win that easily!" he shouted, sinking his claws in. The two met on hind legs, wrestling. "I'm the strongest warrior in the forest!

I'll lead ThunderClan to greatness!" In his boasting, he stumbled the slightest bit, and Minnow was able to kick a leg out from under him. He recoiled quickly, but as they continued to fight Minnow noticed that his arrogance was getting the better of him.

He's getting sloppy, she realized. If he carried on much longer, letting his pride be his downfall, she would be able to seize an opportunity to end this fight. So she pushed on.

"You're nothing but a tyrant!" Minnow spat. She grabbed his flank with her claws and squeezed tight, drawing out blood and pulling fur. "Only a fox-heart would rally two Clans against one! And for what? More hunting ground?"

Rage flashed over Copperfoot's face. "It's my right!" he snarled. "I was born to lead! Duskstar is too weak to take more land for ThunderClan, but once I win he'll see that I'm the rightful leader of ThunderClan!" As he spoke, he left an opening at his belly, and Minnow attacked quickly. Copperfoot screeched in pain and pulled Minnow to the ground. Now they were fighting with the ferocity of a forest full of warriors, but still Copperfoot grew more arrogant and sloppy.

Minnow drew all her strength and battered at Copperfoot, striking true with every blow, hissing and spitting. Copperfoot's eyes widened and a tinge of fear entered them, gone as quickly as it came. It seemed that he was finally realizing just how strong Minnow was, and that she may actually beat him. Yowling in anger at this, Copperfoot attacked again, taking no notice of his own openings, strictly on the offense.

Minnow knew Copperfoot was nearing the end, and she knew she had to give it her all now, or else it would be too late. The two clashed in a final grapple, taking no heed of their own wounds, and Minnow nearly prayed to StarClan for strength. Copperfoot kicked and bit and screeched, but with every move he left himself open to attack, and Minnow ducked and wove like they were fighting in the river. She used every RiverClan battle tactic she knew as she fought him, knowing that the very fate of RiverClan rested on her shoulders.

And then time seemed to slow; Copperfoot screeched a frantic battle cry and leaped at her, claws outstretched as he flew above her, and his belly was exposed. Minnow leaned back on her haunches and drove herself into the air, turning as she did, grabbing onto Copperfoot's belly with her claws and grasping his neck in her teeth. Midair, she twisted and flung Copperfoot down hard, and blood rained from his body as he sailed towards the forest floor. Minnow landed a few tail-lengths away, panting, wondering if she had anything left in her. Copperfoot crumpled to the ground, struggling to stand, but his hind leg was twisted and broken from his rough landing.

Minnow managed to haul herself to her paws, stumbling towards Copperfoot. At last, there was real panic on his face as he tried in vain to stand up. Behind them, the screeches of battle had died down, and Copperfoot's eyes flew wide as he realized he had lost. His face twisted with rage as Minnow approached, growling and preparing to attack again. "You'll never kill me!" He spat, his words edged with panic. His tail lashed behind him. "StarClan would forsake you!"

Minnow's eyes narrowed and she drew her claws, looming over her enemy. "StarClan no longer guides my pawsteps," she meowed coldly. "I can kill you if I want!"

At once the darkness disappeared from Copperfoot's eyes and their normal green hue returned, and his face was veiled with fear. Minnow raised her paw, claws out, and aimed for his throat. Copperfoot squeezed his eyes shut and ducked his head, waiting for the final blow.

But it never came. Minnow dropped her paw, letting her shoulders sag with weariness. At last, before her, Copperfoot was defeated, a broken shell of the cat she'd known before. The other fighting warriors had retreated, and his tyrannous scheme had fallen through. All he could do now was return to his Clan and answer for his crimes. That was enough for Minnow.

Copperfoot opened his eyes and looked up at Minnow. He was panting and struggling to even hold himself upright, and Minnow took a step back. "Why didn't you kill me?" he rasped.

Minnow met his gaze. "I may not be a Clan cat anymore, but I'm still a warrior," she replied. "Warriors don't need to kill to win battles."

She went on. "Go home, Copperfoot. Go back to your mate and kit, scrape together the last of your pitiful life and try to set a better example for your son." She remembered Sorrelstream telling her that Mintfur had given birth to a single kit, Thornkit, Copperfoot's son. Somewhere in ThunderClan was an innocent kit who didn't know his father was a traitor. She paused for a moment. "If they'll even have you."

Copperfoot could no longer meet Minnow's gaze as he clambered uneasily to his paws. Shoulders down, he turned and limped slowly away into the forest. Minnow let out a heavy sigh. *It's over.* She turned and limped back out of the cover of trees onto Sunningrocks, lifting her head to the sky. It was then that she realized there were still two dark-pelted cats fighting weakly near the rain-swollen river. The remaining RiverClan warriors stood by, too weak to intervene, and Minnow's heart dropped as she noticed Sweetstripe's body by the gathered cats. *She didn't make it back to camp.* Minnow stumbled closer and realized that the two cats still fighting were Wasptail and Apollo.

Both toms were covered with wounds, and it amazed Minnow that they were still standing. As she drew nearer, she could see the look of panic on Wasptail's face as he, too, realized that the battle was over, and that he'd lost. He looked around frantically, barely holding off Apollo's blows, as if trying to find an easy way out. Then he started forward and grabbed Apollo roughly by the neck, throwing the black loner into the river before turning and running away towards the moor. Minnow bounded forward, only to watch in horror as Apollo's head bobbed beneath the surface of the water and the swift current began to carry him away.

Chapter 25

For a heartbeat, Minnow could hear nothing but the sound of wind rushing in her ears as she stared wide-eyed at the river. Before she knew it, her paws were pounding across the stones as she raced for the river's edge, her eyes locked on Apollo's flailing form the entire way. The black tom's face held panic and terror as he thrashed in the quick-moving current, and Minnow knew that all his swimming skill in the pond would do nothing for him in the river, especially with the recent rain. She moved faster, ignoring every ache and still-bleeding wound. "Apollo!" she screeched as she neared the water's edge. The gathered RiverClan cats watched in horror as the black-pelted tom tumbled downstream, and Minnow barely met Birchstar's gaze before she threw herself into the river.

Minnow churned the water with her paws, swimming harder and faster than she ever had before. She streamed quickly through the water after Apollo, but he was still several tail-lengths ahead of her, fighting desperately to find a rhythm. His movements were growing slower and weaker, and Minnow kicked faster, praying desperately to reach him in time. Her heart dropped as she remembered her curse, and a new wave of panic gripped her tight as she thought about the consequences of returning to the Clans. *It will take those close to you,* she heard the words hauntingly in her mind. She had left the forest to protect the cats close to her, but since leaving, Apollo had become the closest cat to her; he had become her greatest friend. And maybe, a small voice said in the back of Minnow's mind, it was more than that. And now she had brought him into Clan territories, into danger, with her.

Apollo still drifted farther away from Minnow, and now he seemed to be unconscious, carried along solely by the roaring river. Minnow pushed on, willing herself to move faster, so she could reach him before they got to the deadly gorge. *StarClan, don't take him from me, too!* She thought frantically. She was getting closer to him now, and she could barely breathe; every muscle in her body ached and her lungs were on fire, but she knew she couldn't stop.

Three tail-lengths, two, one...

Minnow slammed into Apollo's water-soaked body, grabbing his scruff in her teeth. Her head pounded and for a moment the forest swayed in her vision, dizziness threatening to drag her beneath the surface of the river. Apollo weighed her down and she slowed, trying to turn towards the river bank. She could see the RiverClan cats, along with Jay and Smokey, bounding along the edge of the water towards her. It looked like they were calling to Minnow, but her hearing was fading, and she knew she wouldn't last much longer in the river. She swam madly for the river's edge, and black spots started to appear in her vision. The tips of her claws grazed stones on the riverbanks and she knew she just had to push a little harder, but carrying Apollo onto the bank seemed impossible. Craning her neck forward as far as she could, she weakly tossed his body halfway onto the bank, safely out of the current's reach.

As soon as the extra weight was off of her, Minnow was torn from Apollo and spun uncontrollably back into the river. She flailed and grasped for something to hold onto, but she was growing weaker, and her hearing and vision were quickly fading out. *Is this it?* She thought weakly. Her claws met something that felt like a thick branch, and she grabbed on tight just before her world faded to black.

All Minnow knew was that her pain was gone. The sting of her wounds, the burning in her lungs, the pounding ache in her head; all gone, replaced by the most comforting warmth she'd ever known. It reminded her of suckling at Ashflower's belly in the nursery, sweet and soothing and safe. Minnow wanted to feel like this forever.

Then Minnow's eyes opened and she found herself staring at the empty hollow of Fourtrees, the darkness of night broken by the silver moonlight that washed the ground. The tall grass swayed gently, and no noise sounded. Minnow stood, inspecting her pelt, but she couldn't see any of her wounds, and she felt better than she ever had in her life. She glanced around, confused, seeing nothing but Fourtrees and the moor. But she could smell starlight, and the distant but familiar scent of StarClan cats, and as soon as she

recognized it, anger pulsed through her.

Why am I in StarClan? She thought angrily. Had she died trying to save Apollo? Even if she had, hadn't he been condemned to not walk in StarClan because of her curse? Minnow looked into the distance, towards the eerie shadowy forest that she knew as the Place of No Stars. If she were truly dead, wouldn't that be her destination?

And still Minnow was alone. She couldn't see any other cat around her. "Hello?" She called out tentatively. "Is anyone there?"

As if her words were a cue, Minnow heard soft pawsteps approaching her from behind, and she spun to see a small group of cats padding towards her. Immediately she recognized them: Frostfoot, Hawkshade, Ivyclaw, Maplefur, and Sunheart, the cats she'd spoken to before. When she had gone to the Moonstone to seek answers about her curse, these were the cats she had seen. She had only spoken to Hawkshade and Frostfoot, but she knew all five of them had been involved in the decision to send her back to RiverClan after her accident in the river; they had caused her curse. And now she was seeing them again, and she drew her claws out with a growl.

"Hello, Minnow." Frostfoot was the first to speak, sitting calmly on the grass. Her pale fur glittered with stars.

Minnow couldn't match the StarClan cat's gentle attitude, even though she knew Frostfoot was kind. "Why am I here?" She demanded. She raked her claws on the grass. "I want nothing to do with StarClan! You threw me out of the forest, you gave up on me and cursed me, and now you have the nerve to bring me here! How dare you show your faces to me!" She growled again, and once more wondered if she was dead. She didn't want to be; she wanted to be back by the river with Apollo, to know he was okay, and that she hadn't caused his death like she'd caused the others. "Just let me go! Dead or alive, I want out of here! I'm not a Clan cat anymore."

Despite her words and her anger, the StarClan cats' expressions were calm, even the foul-tempered Hawkshade, as they looked at her. Frostfoot stepped forward, pride glittering in her eyes, and the

others followed. "You've always been a Clan cat, Minnow," Frostfoot purred.

Sunheart spoke next, his flame-colored fur lit up like the entire night sky. "You gave up everything to save your Clan from the curse," he meowed. "You gave up your entire life and left them, knowing that remaining in RiverClan would destroy everything you loved."

"And in the end, you still returned," Maplefur added. "Despite the curse and what harm it could do, you went back, risking it all to once again save your Clan."

The small dark form of Ivyclaw stood. "*That* is what it means to be a Clan cat, Minnow. That's what it means to be a warrior."

Minnow didn't know what to make of their words, but in the calm setting of StarClan, she found it hard to hold on to her anger. "What are you talking about?" She snapped. "I'm *cursed.* Or did you forget what you did to me? I knew I shouldn't have come back, but I did anyway, and I almost lost Apollo! I don't even know if he's okay!" Her heart raced, and the fear that Apollo might be dead hung thickly over her.

"He's alive," Frostfoot said calmly. "You saved him, Minnow. But not without a great cost of your own."

The StarClan warrior's eyes were shadowed with sadness and her words sunk in, and Minnow met her gaze. "So I'm dead?" She said weakly, feeling defeated.

Finally, Hawkshade spoke up, having been silent this whole time. "Normally this would be where we would collect your spirit, to join StarClan," he said, his voice gruff. Then his gaze softened, and the slightest purr escaped him. "But StarClan isn't ready for you yet, young warrior. I'm afraid we'll have to send you back again."

Minnow's eyes flew open, so wide that she thought they might pop out. "No!" She screeched. "Not after what happened before! I was cursed before; who knows what could happen this time?" Her heart raced and she began to panic. "I've already put RiverClan in danger;

I can't do the same to Jay and Smokey and Apollo!" Her tail lashed, fluffed out with fear behind her.

Sunheart flicked his tail. "Calm down," he coaxed. "You won't be cursed again. Sending you back isn't what caused the curse in the first place."

Minnow snapped her head towards the ginger StarClan tom. What did he mean by that? "What are you talking about?" She asked, nearly breathless as her mind raced.

Frostfoot spoke again. "We were wrong, Minnow," she said slowly. "It has only been recently that StarClan has become aware of the true cause of your curse. You were always meant to return to your Clan; you have a great deal left to do to serve them. Sending you back wasn't a mistake."

Minnow could barely think. "Then why was I cursed?" She asked, almost frantically. "Why has all of this happened?" Her words were nearly a sob.

Hawkshade's eyes grew dark and his gaze ominous as he met Minnow's. "It was our fault," he murmured. Louder, he added, "I'm sure you remember what Frostfoot showed you, and how divided we were on the decision?"

Minnow thought back to her previous visit with StarClan, when Frostfoot showed her the memory of her warrior ancestors voting on her fate. They had all been either strongly for or against sending her back to RiverClan, and Hawkshade had cursed his companions for wanting to save her life. She nodded.

Hawkshade went on. "Our division is what caused your curse," he meowed, then sighed. It was followed by a long pause before he added darkly, "Bad things happen when StarClan isn't unified. I'm afraid we'll never understand just why we had to decide your fate, but it tested us. And we've learned the kind of destruction that can befall the Clans when their ancestors are divided amongst themselves."

"In the coming moons," Maplefur said, "StarClan will need to be

unified more than ever. The Clans are shifting and changing, and they need us to be strong so that they can be strong. You may have won the battle today, Minnow, but it is not over."

"But if there's one thing that StarClan agrees on, it's that it's not your time to die," Ivyclaw said warmly. "We'll be sending you back to the forest again, curse-free." Her normally shy eyes glittered with warmth and a tinge of humor.

A great weight fell off of Minnow in that moment. Not only was she alive, but she wouldn't have to live under the threat of the curse anymore! RiverClan would be safe with her around! She could hardly believe the news and she tried to wrap her mind around what that could mean for her.

But then her heart sank; she could return to RiverClan now, but that would mean saying goodbye to the other barn cats. Suddenly her heart was torn in two. It wouldn't be fair to them, and she would miss them so much. But at the same time, she couldn't ignore the tug she'd been feeling for moons calling her back to the reeds and the river. How could she make such a choice?

"Minnow?" Frostfoot's soft voice interrupted Minnow's thoughts. The StarClan cats were still watching her. "What's wrong?"

Minnow sighed. "Where am I supposed to go?" She asked. It would make her feel a little better about whatever decision she made if StarClan would point her in the right direction.

Frostfoot purred. "That is for you to decide," she meowed, which didn't make Minnow feel any better. "In your heart you are a RiverClan warrior, but you've built a life for yourself outside Clan territories. We can't tell you where to go, but just know that whatever you do, RiverClan will still need you. All the Clans will. In the days coming, all four Clans will need your wisdom and fairness, your compassion and courage. You mean more to the forest than you know, and we will be with you, watching over you, every step of the way."

Minnow's heart lifted a bit. "I suppose I have to go now," she said.

"Not just yet," Frostfoot purred again. "There's someone I think you'd like to see." The five StarClan cats turned and padded away, and as they walked into the distance they passed another cat moving towards Minnow. His achingly familiar pelt flowed like a flaming sunset, glittering with countless stars, eyes as green as newleaf grass, and Minnow's heart caught in her throat.

"Flamepelt!"

Chapter 26

Minnow rushed to her old friend, nearly crashing into him as their pelts collided and they fondly rubbed muzzles. Again, Minnow painfully remembered Flamepelt's untimely death, and a hole in her heart seemed to be filled as soon as she set her eyes on him. The last time she'd visited StarClan, she hadn't been able to see him. But now, here he was, right in front of her.

"Oh, Flamepelt," she whispered. "I've missed you so much."

The ginger warrior's purr rumbled like thunder in Minnow's ears. "I missed you, too," he murmured into her ear.

At last the two broke apart, and Flamepelt looked Minnow up and down, shaking his head as if in disbelief. "You've changed," he said simply.

"A lot has happened," Minnow replied. She hesitated, then spoke again. "I... I'm sorry."

Flamepelt gazed at her warmly. "You have nothing to apologize for," he told her. "I've never blamed you, not for one moment. I only wish we could've had more time together."

Minnow was nearly taken aback at the attitude and wisdom that she felt radiating from her old friend, as if his time in StarClan had changed him. *Why wouldn't it?* She thought. "So do I," she admitted. "I don't even know what my life would be like if all of this hadn't happened."

Flamepelt purred again. "I'm so very proud of you," he said. "I want you to know that. And even though I can't be part of your future, I want you to know that I always loved you. And I'll always be there to guide you from StarClan."

Minnow's heart swelled with love, then sank almost immediately as

Apollo's handsome face and mischievous eyes flashed through her mind. Once again her heart ached, like it was tearing in two. She knew that she had accepted Flamepelt's death long ago, but part of her felt guilty facing him now, knowing how she had come to feel about the dark-pelted loner.

Flamepelt seemed to read her thoughts. "He's a good cat, Minnow," he meowed. "I can't ever be with you, and I'll always be waiting for you in StarClan. But he's waiting for you in the forest." His whiskers twitched as he gazed at her with loving eyes. "You aren't the same cat I once knew, the cat I fell in love with. You're *better*. You've changed in ways most cats never do. You should embrace who you are now, and what your life has become. And that includes every cat you've met and come to love along the way."

Minnow could hardly find the words to say. "Thank you," she breathed.

Flamepelt leaned forward to touch his nose to Minnow's. "There's a place for him in RiverClan, if he so chooses," he whispered. "There's a place for both of you."

Minnow closed her eyes and leaned into Flamepelt, breathing in his scent. He soon pulled away, and she almost protested, but she felt herself being tugged away from him, into the distance; it was time to go back.

"Goodbye, Minnow," Flamepelt said to her, backing away. "May StarClan light your path." His form was growing distant as he spoke, nearing the horizon. "We are always with you." More starry pelts began to gather around him as other StarClan cats gathered at his side, and Minnow recognized them all: Shadebelly and Breezekit, then Ashstar and Blacktail, and lastly Beechclaw, Sweetstripe, and Bristlepelt. Their distant faces were full of pride as they nodded a farewell to her, and it was the last image in Minnow's mind before everything faded out again.

There was a distant echo of muffled voices, and the soft bubbling of water, and the softest, sweetest breeze that lulled Minnow awake. Her pelt felt heavy and her eyelids seemed to be weighed down, but she could feel the sun's warmth beating down on her and one

thought sounded in her mind.

I'm alive.

"Minnow!" Her hearing fully returned and she heard a familiar voice calling to her. "Minnow!" She mustered all her strength and managed to open her eyes, at once meeting the wide-eyed gaze of Smokey. Immediately her friend's face was washed with relief, and she nearly collapsed on the ground. "You're okay!" She exclaimed. "We... we thought you were dead. We were afraid Jay didn't pull you out in time."

Coughing, Minnow managed to sit up, feeling the river water streaming off her sodden body, but her strength was quickly returning. She looked at Jay and nodded gratefully to him. "Thank you," she mewed. Jay nodded back.

Minnow blinked a few times and looked around to see many other cats around her: Jay, Birchstar, Cloudsplash, Redblaze, and just behind them, Apollo. The black tom was awake and standing, having shaken the water from his thick pelt, already half-dried from the greenleaf sun. "Apollo!" she exclaimed, bounding over to him. They pressed their foreheads together, and Minnow could smell lingering fear-scent coming from him.

"You saved me," he breathed, barely audible. Pulling away, Minnow met his amber gaze. "But I almost lost you," he added.

"I'm okay," Minnow reassured him. "We're okay." Apollo nodded once, and they were silent for several long moments.

"It's over," Minnow then found herself saying.

"The battle?" she heard Birchstar ask from behind her. Minnow turned and looked at him; she'd only ever known him as RiverClan's deputy, but now through his weariness and wounds from battle, she could feel the strength, wisdom, and courage of a leader pulsing from him.

Minnow shook her head slowly. "The curse." Her words were barely a breath, and they were met with wide-eyed stares from the

gathered cats. The RiverClan warriors seemed almost in disbelief, and the barn cats' expressions were a mixture of shock and delight.

"How do you know?" Smokey asked, nearly frozen on the stones.

"StarClan," Minnow replied shortly, replaying the events in her head. Part of her was suddenly scared that it had been a dream, but she knew otherwise. It had been too real, and she could still smell the stars that glittered in the fur of the StarClan warriors. And seeing all those RiverClan cats, her former Clanmates; that *couldn't* have been a dream.

"I visited with StarClan," Minnow explained. "They told me it's over, and that I made the right choice to come back and help." She looked at the barn cats, and noted the pride on their faces. "My curse is over."

Jay and Smokey swarmed around her, brushing their pelts against hers and purring. "That's wonderful news!" Smokey meowed.

"Does..." Birchstar seemed to hesitate. "Does that mean you'll be returning to RiverClan?" he asked tentatively.

Minnow wasn't sure how to answer, even after speaking to Frostfoot and the others. How could she ever weigh her life in RiverClan against the last few seasons at the barn? Which one was home? Where did her heart truly lie?

And then, as if the answer were presenting itself before her, Minnow turned to see Apollo. She couldn't imagine leaving his side now, not after everything they'd been through together. They'd faced so much, both real enemies and inner problems. She couldn't go back to RiverClan and leave him, but she wondered if she would be truly fulfilled going back to the Twoleg farm. It was a tough choice to make, but she knew that as long as she was with Apollo, it didn't matter where she was.

Apollo's eyes were filled with love, and he intertwined his tail with hers. "Wherever you go," he said confidently, "I'll be with you."

There's a place for him in RiverClan, if he so chooses.

"Apollo," Minnow meowed slowly. "Will you come with me to RiverClan?"

Immediately, Apollo nodded, and Minnow heard a chorus of purrs from the RiverClan cats. She didn't need to hear them speak to know that they wouldn't object. Minnow turned and looked hopefully at Jay and Smokey, but the two were already shaking their heads.

"We're sorry," Smokey said, almost sadly. "We can't leave our kits, and we're perfectly happy with our life in the barn."

Jay stood tall. "We'll miss you," he added. "But it's obvious that you two are being called somewhere else. The forest is where you belong. Just don't forget that you have friends beyond the border."

Minnow's heart was a bundle of mixed emotions as she watched Jay and Smokey turn and begin to walk into the distance, towards their home. Minnow already missed them, and missed the barn, and all the things she was leaving behind there. Apollo called after them, "Say goodbye to Oliver for us!"

Nodding, Minnow called as well, "And tell him thanks for everything!" She wondered if Storm and Rose would miss them, and she knew she would miss play-fighting with them. But she knew they would all be safe, now that Jay and Smokey knew how to fight. They would train the kits the same way, and they wouldn't ever be helpless in the face of danger.

"It's time to return to camp," Birchstar said softly. Minnow looked between the river and the forest, towards the horizon and Sunningrocks next to her. When she had left RiverClan, she'd left a part of her behind. She didn't believe she would ever come back, and it had felt as if she was throwing her entire life away. Somehow, leaving the barn behind didn't feel the same. It was sad, but she knew that her life there was always meant to be temporary. StarClan hadn't forsaken her the way she thought, and even when they couldn't see her, they were looking out for her. Everything had happened exactly as it was meant to, and the piece of her that she had left behind was now reclaimed, and she felt whole. She turned to Apollo, pressing her pelt against his. Everything she had gone

through in the last many moons had brought her to this, and she didn't think she would have it any other way.

She looked at the faces of the cats around her; her friends, her Clan, her family. "Let's go home."